

Article Summary – Experiences of Earned Success

Snapshot of this article:

- ✓ Community college setting (3 colleges)
- ✓ Qualitative study (97 semi-structured interviews of students)
- ✓ Examines shifts in students' academic confidence and the mechanisms that promote those shifts

Bickerstaff, S., Barragan, M., & Rucks-Ahidiana, Z. (2017). Experiences of earned success: Community college students' shifts in college confidence. *International Journal of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education*, 29(3), pp. 501-510.

Research Question(s)

Recent initiatives aimed at improving community college student success rates have placed emphasis on aligning curriculum and reforming developmental education, but research has also revealed the important role of non-academic/non-cognitive factors (e.g., social integration, sense of belonging in relation to the cultural/institutional norms of the college, and student confidence). While the extant research has clarified the significance of these non-academic/non-cognitive factors, there remains a lack of clarity around the specific ways in which college environments can be structured to foster them. This study focuses on one of these non-academic/non-cognitive factors—student confidence—and attempts to provide specific clarification around the ways in which it is shaped through day-to-day interactions at a community college. The specific research questions they address are:

1. What are students' perceptions about their confidence upon entering college?
2. What are students' perceptions about the types of shifts in confidence they experienced in their first few semesters and the mechanisms that promoted such shifts?

The authors qualify *academic confidence* as being similar to self-efficacy, and they reference the work of Sander and Sanders (2006) when defining it as “students' certainty in their ability to meet the academic and social demands of college” (p. 501).

Methodology

This study was part of a broader inquiry into student success courses. In total, 97 semi-structured interviews of community college students from three colleges were conducted. All interviews were approximately 40 minutes in duration and were audio recorded and then later transcribed. Slightly more than half of the interviewees were female, 35% were students of color, and 55% were between the ages of 18-20.

Academic confidence emerged inductively during analysis. Next, a set of deductive codes were developed and tested with a subset of transcripts. The authors moved through a recursive process of testing their codes, refining the codes, and recalibrating their definitions. Once the data had been coded using this scheme, they were further sorted temporally (i.e., references about past confidence and present confidence) and according to significant factors (e.g., knowledge about college, goals and plans, past experience and motivation, and shifts in confidence).

All coding was conducted using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, and coding validity was achieved through various means. For example, every tenth transcript was coded by two

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researchers and a third researcher reviewed that coding for consistency and discrepancy (discrepancies were used as a vehicle for further refining the code list and code definitions).

Results

Data analysis revealed that students in this study entered college with a form of confidence that fit into one of two categories: (a) self-assured = “students who entered college with confidence,” and (b) apprehensive = students who entered college feeling “apprehensive about their collegiate endeavors” (p. 503).¹ For students in both categories, however, prior educational experiences as well as expectations about community college shaped their perspectives.

Data analysis also uncovered that almost all students reported shifts in their confidence as they moved through the first three semesters at college. These shifts were characterized as: (a) destabilization = those “rooted in experiences of destabilization that led students to reevaluate their understanding of what it means to be a college student, which in some cases undermined students’ confidence,” and (b) earned success = those resulting from “an experience of earned success, which was linked to positive shifts in confidence, enhanced motivation, and more robust academic identities” (p. 503).

Destabilization

Destabilizing shifts occurred as students determined that college was either more challenging than expected, or they were less prepared than originally predicted. In most cases, students made these determinations through interactions with faculty that involved negative feedback on their work. When students were able to identify actions (or lack of actions) that led to this destabilizing experience, adjust them, and subsequently experience a more positive outcome as a result of this adjustment, positive changes to confidence occurred. In essence, through experiences of earned success a student’s confidence was enhanced. In contrast, when students were unable to identify actions (or lack of actions) that led to the destabilizing experience, no adjustments were made and no improvement in outcome was achieved. In these latter cases, the destabilizing experience led to diminished confidence and increased apprehension.

In some cases, diminished confidence and increased apprehension led students in this study to rethink their career goals. For example, one student stated:

I’m definitely starting to think more realistic now because when you first get into college, like ‘I want to do this and this and this.’ And you’re like, ‘Well I can’t, I’m not really smart enough to do that...this is really hard to do.’ Like teaching is my main goal, but I have a fallback. My fallback is being a police officer...or security guard. (p. 506)

Earned Success

Similar to destabilization, experiences of earned success occurred when students received some form of tangible feedback about their potential. In the case of earned success, the feedback was positive in nature and resulted in students feeling increased confidence in their own abilities and overall college endeavors. These types of experiences had three common characteristics: “they provided students with evidence of their success, resulted from students’ own actions or effort,

¹ The authors emphasize that even though their labels of “self-assured” and “apprehensive” seem to suggest confidence is static in nature that is not actually the case, and their data substantiates this.

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and were related to an identified area of concern or weakness” (p. 506). Of these three, evidence of success seemed particularly impactful.

Importantly, students who reported entering college feeling self-assured as well as those who reported entering college feeling apprehensive described experiences of earned success. This suggests that these types of experiences can be significant for students with various degrees of confidence. Even more important, some students in the study who described experiences of earned success and a subsequent increase in confidence also conveyed heightened academic and/or career aspirations.

Implications

This study’s findings illustrate that confidence is not static and that students experience shifts across time in the ways they perceive their capability and potential. Generally speaking, students who predominantly experience destabilization convey a higher degree of uncertainty about their ability to complete a college degree, which at times leads them to downgrade their academic and/or career goals. However, students who predominantly experience earned-success—especially in areas where they previously struggled—convey an increase in confidence about their ability to complete a college degree, which at times leads them to embrace higher academic and/or career goals.

Through their analysis, the authors reveal a set of possible strategies for structuring teaching and learning in the classroom, and activities in other spaces on campus, so that more students experience *earned success* and a strengthened commitment to their academic goals.

- Faculty ought to make as transparent as possible the results of students’ efforts/actions. The challenge, however, is that negative feedback (e.g., poor grades) can have a damaging impact on confidence if students believe it is indicative of a lack of capability. To get around this challenge, faculty can design their course and instruction to provide multiple opportunities for students to experience incremental success as they learn new concepts and practice new skills. More specifically, faculty can break up large, high-stakes assignments into smaller parts, provide additional scaffolding for assignments, and offer more frequent feedback (that does not always have the consequence of a grade).
- Students need opportunities to learn how to effectively self-reflect on their own work. In essence, through learning self-reflection strategies students open up another channel through which feedback/evidence related to academic performance can be received. Faculty can support this outcome by having students: reflect on the amount of effort they will need to invest in an assignment and then how much time they in fact did spend on it, and assess their drafted work against a rubric (perhaps developed by the class).
- Faculty can provide more guided practice related to successful college-going behavior. This might include introducing students to: various note-taking formats, content-specific reading strategies, and effective study techniques.
- Faculty can help students identify their current strengths and ways in which those strengths can be leveraged within that course.

Additional Citations

Sander, P., & Sanders, L. (2006). Understanding academic confidence. *Psychology Teaching Review*, 12(1), 29-37.