Motivating Adults Students through Degree Completion

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Introduction

For the past two years, I have been working with non-traditional students in a unique role that assists students through admission and advising. Typical admission counselors or admission representatives work with students through the inquiry phase until that student applies, deposits, and is scheduled for new student orientation. My role is unique as I am the only counselor for my population at my institution, so students considering my program work solely with me and they not only work with me through the admission process but also through advising, scheduling, and orientation. Each student I work with gets one-on-one counseling, advising, and orientation sessions. In addition to all of this, I continue to work with them throughout their first semester to encourage retention and reduce melt. My relationships with students is very different from the typical admission counselor as a significant amount of counseling and coaching is put into building each student relationship.

The students that I work with come from a variety of backgrounds but typically they are nontraditional adult students that all have the common goal of attaining their bachelor's degree in an accelerated evening and weekend format. The institution and program that I work for is the same institution and program that I graduated from with my Bachelor's degree and in my time as a student and working as an admission counselor at my college, I tend to see students falling into two main categories that drive them to return to college. I put most students into the following:

1. Returning to school out of necessity (ex. employer is requiring it, divorce, etc.)
2. Returning to school by choice (ex. wants to finish a degree they previously started, changing careers, etc.)

While these categories are an oversimplification, as my students can have multiple factors contributing to their decision to return to school, after I meet with them I can usually place them into one of those two categories. Again, this is not always the case as some students can fall into both categories or some may not disclose their reason for returning to school. However, since the students that I see are generally being driven back to school for one of those two reasons, I tend to use a different strategy for each population when it comes to recruiting and retaining them. Additionally, I have also concluded that because the driving force that is bringing these students is different, I am confronted with differing levels or motivation when it comes to getting these students to enter the classroom.

As the summer semester is coming to an end at my institution, I want to examine the students that I recruited for the semester and use my theoretical analysis to examine my coaching strategies as well as possible ways to increase motivation in my new students. I recruited a total of 17 new students for the summer semester, 16 female and 1 male. Seven of the 17 were conditional admits, meaning they had a cumulative GPA below a 2.5 and had to maintain a 2.5 GPA or higher in their first semester. The other nine students came in as clear admits meeting all admission requirements. Now coming into the end of the semester, I have 14 new students remaining, 13 female and 1 male. While students in the program generally have varying levels of socioeconomic status (SES), most students recruited for the summer session did not qualify for grant monies. Only three of the 16 students qualified for Pell and Ohio Opportunity Grants placing them at a lower SES. Of the three students that qualified for grant monies, only one has remained in the program. Of the 14 remaining new students, five students are nursing majors, four students are business majors (accounting, business management, legal studies) and the remaining five students fall under arts and science majors, which is a mix of social work,

psychology, and humanities. Six of the students identified as African American, four students

identified as Caucasian, and the remaining four students did not identify or disclose. Of the

students recruited for the summer, eight of the students disclosed they were pursuing their degree

because of their employer (necessity), four are pursing as a personal goal or change of career

(choice), and one student had a variety of factors that contributed to her returning to school

(necessity and choice). Lastly, one student did not have strong indications of why they were

choosing to pursue their degree. Of the three students who did not persist in their first semester

with us, all three females identified as African American. Two were conditional admits and one

was a clear admit. One student was a nursing major, one student was an arts and science major,

and the last was a business major. Two disclosed they were pursing their degree for their

employer and the last did not reveal a reason.

	# of Students	Admission Type	Gender	Ethnicity/Race	Major	SES	Reason for Return
Start	17	7 - Conditional 10 - Clear	16 - F 1 - M	9- African American 4- Caucasian 4- Undisclosed	6- Nursing 5- Business 6- A & S	14- Middle/High 3- Lower	Necessity - 10 Choice - 4 Combination - 1 Not Disclosed - 2
End	14	5 - Conditional 9 - Clear	13 - F 1 - M	6- African American 4- Caucasian 4- Undisclosed	5- Nursing 4- Business 5- A & S	13- Middle/High 1- Lower	Necessity - 8 Choice - 4 Combination - 1 Not Disclosed - 1

For this project, I am interested in applying the theoretical perspectives of Expectancy-Value

Theory, Goal Orientation Theory- specifically Ability Theory and how it relates to Helpless and

Mastery Oriented Patterns and Performance and Mastery goal orientations in students, and

Attribution Theory. Chapters 2, 3, and 5 of *Motivation in Education: Theory, Research, and Applications (4th edition.)* by Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece (2014) detail expectancy-value theory, goals and goal orientation, and attribution theory and will contribute to my analysis.

Theoretical Analysis

Theoretical Perspective 1 - Expectancy Value Theory:

As the text indicates, Expectancy-Value theory of motivation examines how both expectancies and values are important in predicting students' future choices, engagement, persistence, and achievement (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece, 2014, p. 47). Expectancy-Value theory plays an important role for adult students when they make the decision to return to school. Additionally, Expectancy-Value theory comes to the foreground as students move along in their coursework. Students beliefs about liking and interest are related to how they will engage in a specific course. "Students may be confident that they can do well and expect to succeed, but if they do not value the task they will be less likely to choose to engage in it. In the same way, students may believe that a task or activity is interesting or important to them, but if they think they cannot do it well eventually they will not engage in it" (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece, 2014, p. 47).

Adult students who are returning to school because they are being required to by the employer or have returned to school because of major life changes (such as a divorce) may have lower motivation because they did not set the goal of returning to college for themselves but have been forced into it. As Atkinson's theory suggests, we may feel capable of doing a task, but if we do not value it, then we will be less likely to engage in it (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece, 2014, p. 51). For example, nursing students who are content with practicing as an RN are very much capable of earning their BSN but because they do not value earning the BSN degree, they

are less likely to engage during the admission process and can exhibit lower levels of motivation towards coursework needed to complete the degree, especially non-nursing classes. Of my three new students that dropped from their summer courses, Brittany who was the nursing student, had a low level of aspiration, and I suspect that since earning her BSN was not a task that she set for herself, that her motivation behind earning the degree was low. Additionally, I think the costs (time spent away from family, not having the time to dedicate fully to her studies) associated with going back to school outweighed the value of earning the degree for her at this time.

On the other hand, as the text discusses, students that believe that a task or activity is interesting or important to them, but feel they cannot do it well, will choose not to engage in the task, is another common perception held by students that come through the admission process. Students who are choosing to return to school because they genuinely invested in the task of earning the degree may eventually disengage if they fear failure (often these students were unsuccessful the first time they attended college) or encounter coursework they believe they cannot succeed in. One of my new students this semester, Dana has a genuine interest in wanting to earn her degree. She became disengaged for almost a month because of her fear of failing again. Eventually I could get through to her and she got over the "I cannot do this" mindset. However, I have lost other students in past semesters who believe they cannot be successful in college and never follow through with earning their degree (to my knowledge at least). I had a new student this semester completely disengaged in her statistics course because she did not perceive she had the aptitude to complete it.

Theoretical Perspective 2 – Goal and Goal Orientations:

Just like school-children, it is easy to observe adult student's theories or beliefs about themselves. Ability Theory proposes that students hold many types of philosophies about

themselves including how they learn best, how much control they have over different situations, and what is needed for success in school (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece 2014, p.184). A key researcher in Ability Theory, Carol Dweck proposed that individuals hold different concepts about their academic abilities. Entity Theory or fixed mindset students believe that their abilities are relatively fixed, stable, and unchanging over time and task conditions. Incremental theory or growth mindset states that students equate ability with learning and that ability can change and increase with experience, effort, and learning (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece 2014, p.187).

In her book *Self-Theories: Their Role in Motivation, Personality, and Development* (2000), Carol Dweck discusses that students with Entity Theory tend to feel smart because of low-effort successes, and outperforming other students. An over-concern for looking smart, a distaste for challenge, and a decreased ability to cope with set-backs is often fostered in these students instead of a can-do mentality (Dweck 2000, p. 2). Those holding an Entity Theory have several characteristics that align with performance goal-orientation, which represents a focus on demonstrating competence or ability and how ability will be judged relative to others (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece 2014, p.187). In addition, helpless oriented patterns can be common- where students view their failures as out of their control and nothing can be done. Studies conducted by Dweck show that those with helpless oriented patterns disparage their intellectual ability, display negative emotions, have lower persistence, and deteriorating performance if they fail when attempting a challenging task (Dweck 2000, p. 6). I suspect that one of my newly admitted students, Terri holds the entity orientation and is displaying performance goal-orientation. After her first class, she self-declared that she had the highest grade in the class and outwardly does not appear to be focused on mastering the course material as much as comparing her ability to others in the classroom. Her second class is just about to conclude and I will be curious to hear her

interpretation of the course. While I am not active with students in the classroom, I think it will be interesting to find out if this student exhibits helpless oriented patterns as she progresses into more challenging coursework and I review course feedback forms.

On the other end of the spectrum, Dweck describes students that exhibit Incremental Theory as students who engage fully in tasks, exerting effort to master something, stretching their skills and putting their knowledge to good use. Even those with low confidence in their intelligence thrive on challenge, throwing themselves into difficult tasks and sticking with them (Dweck, 2000, p. 16). Incremental orientation shares similarities to mastery goal-orientation, which is defined as a focus on learning, mastering the task according to self-set standards or self-improvement, developing new skills, improving or developing competence, trying to accomplish something challenging, and trying to gain understanding or insight (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece 2014, p.187).

While I work with students in their first semester, you can start to see after their second or third class an emergence of goal orientations and orientation patterns. The student that I previously mentioned, Dana is showing mastery goal-orientation and is really throwing herself into the course and sticking with it. She has shared with me that she is not afraid to ask questions if she does not understand and is seeking out support if she needs it. Goal setting was vital for Dana as she was very nervous about her ability to return to school and being a conditional admit. When we were finally reconnected, we set the goal for her to complete one class with a grade she felt comfortable achieving (which she set as a C+) and then we would move forward with seeing if our program was the right fit for her (she actually passed with an A-). Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece explain that goals need to be proximal (close at hand), specific, and moderate in difficulty so students have a challenge to work towards (p. 141) I think that in Dana's situation, helping her

to set this goal was key to helping her obtain a stronger sense of self-efficacy, allowing her to

become more motivated and choose activities that lead toward the distal goal attainment of

earning her degree (p. 174).

Theoretical Perspective 3 -Attribution Theory:

Attribution Theory is the examination of causal explanations for success and failure and

their influence on behavior. Attribution Theory allows us to examine student's perceptions in an

achievement settings and postulate how beliefs influence motivation, expectations for success,

self-efficacy, emotions, and achievement behaviors (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece, 2014 p. 80).

Attributions are perceived causes of outcomes; however, they may not be the actual causes.

Attributions are categorized into three dimensions: stability, locus and control. The stability

dimension refers to how stable a cause is over time, ranging from stable to unstable. Locus

denotes whether a perceived cause is internal or external to the person. Controllability refers to

how much control the person has over the cause; it can range from controllable to uncontrollable

(Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece, 2014 p. 84).

Attribution research proposes that there are many schemas and inference rules that people

use to make attributions that can be incorrect or lead to biases (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece,

2014 p. 89). The student who I previously mentioned, Terri appears to support a self-centered

bias. When speaking with me regarding her last class, she stated that she led much of the class

discussion and in class group assignments. While the instructor acknowledged that she is a bright

student, he felt she was monopolizing the class time and slightly disruptive, often straying the

class off topic. The two interpretations of the class indicate how biases can influence the

attribution process.

Application

As I reviewed the above theoretical perspectives and how they relate to students I began thinking about a post a classmate contributed to our class discussion. The classmate, Katelin Dillon pointed out that Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece explained, "expectancy beliefs (including self-concepts, ability perceptions, and expectancies for success) predict academic achievement. Values are positively correlated with actual achievement, but when both expectancy beliefs and values are used to predict achievement, expectancy beliefs are significant predictors whereas values are not. In contrast, in terms of intentions to take future courses and enrollment in those courses (choice behaviors), values—including attainment value, interest, and utility value—are better predictors than are expectancy belief" (p. 65). I thought that Ms. Dillon's suggestion of providing students with a questionnaire to help drive instruction and boost student and educator expectancy beliefs and values was a task that I could easily integrate into my admission processes.

When student matriculates, it would be easy to incorporate a questionnaire into their new student orientation packets. Information gathered from a formal questionnaire would allow us to determine not only the individual student's strengths and weaknesses, but the incoming cohort's strengths and weaknesses. This would allow us to determine what content areas those students appear to be less motivated in completing and we can better focus our efforts and resources to those areas. Additionally, this data could help identify students that may have lower aspirations towards completing their degree, thereby allowing us to shift our retention focus on those students. For example, the nurses who identify that they are returning for their BSN because they are being required by their employer and have low levels of aspiration and do not value the non-

nursing courses that are required by the curriculum might be better served to have non-nursing

courses woven in throughout their program plan instead of all at once. This might reduce melt in

this student population.

In addition to this, I think that by incorporating a proximal goal and progress form into

the new student orientation packet for my students who are conditional will assist them as they

transition back into the classroom and work towards clear admission status. Schunk, Pintrich,

Meece explain that while working on tasks, students compare their progress to their goals. The

belief that they are making progress raises self-efficacy and results in continued motivation (p.

208) In the case of Dana, having her set a goal that was challenging but attainable for her, it

really boosted her confidence as she saw herself progressing and exceeding her goal. Ultimately

achieving this goal has increased her motivation to succeed in the program. While this has not

been a formal practice of mine, the positive results that I saw with Dana after she completed her

first class has prompted me to incorporate this practice for the students that I recruit in the fall.

While I am still considering ways that we can encourage or facilitate mastery goal-orientation in

students who otherwise display performance goal-orientation, I am not sure if I am equipped to

address this as I do not interact with students in the classroom. However, if I could assess goal

orientations in the questionnaire mentioned above, we would be able to relay that information to

instructors and they would be better equipped to work with these students in the classroom.

Lastly, while I am not an instructor, I think because I have built and established a

relationship with my students that I able to provide creditable attributional feedback. "Teachers

[need to] attempt to give accurate feedback to the students, rather than noncredible feedback

designed to encourage them and maintain their self-esteem" (Schunk, Pintrich, and Meece, 2014

p. 117). By having honest conversations with my students, I can serve in a role like a teacher to

help students make accurate attributions for their own behaviors. While I am always a sounding

board for my students, I do not usually address their attributions unless it is a failure situation

and I am required to provide them reasons they failed and what we can do to address the

situation moving forward.

Reflection/Conclusion