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## New study links student motivations for going to college to their success

Submitted by Scott Jaschik on April 25, 2013 - 3:00am

Why did you decide to go to college?

Asking that question of new students in a more formal way might help colleges find ways to encourage more students to complete their programs, according to [a new study](#) [1] from University of Rochester education researchers published in *The Journal of College Student Development*.

The study found that students motivated by a desire for autonomy and competence tended to earn higher grades and show a greater likelihood of persistence than did other students. (The findings were controlled for academic background and various other factors, and were based on surveys of 2,500 students at a community college and a liberal arts college that were not identified.)

The study comes at a time when many researchers are exploring the qualities that make some students more likely than others (of similar socioeconomic backgrounds and academic preparation) to succeed. Gallup researchers, for example, are reporting [that students who hope they will succeed](#) [2] (as measured by, among other things, the ability to set goals and develop plans to achieve them) are more likely than others to succeed.

The Rochester researchers focus instead on "self-determination theory," in which the reasons students seek a college education could affect their chances of success. In several instances, the researchers found that the impact of different motivations varied by socioeconomic group.

For instance, wealthier students appeared more likely than low-income students to achieve success based on their interest in studying certain subject areas. It's not that low-income students don't want to study various areas, but their motivation for enrolling in college may be more related to a desire to improve their financial situation, and that has a strong impact on their success.

Doug Guiffrida, associate professor of counseling and human development at Rochester, said that this finding suggests that those advising low-income students should be encouraged to reinforce -- for those who place a high priority on economic advancement -- the relationship between their studies and their later likely economic success.

He said that it's important to remember that "intrinsic interests matter" and can influence the success or failure of students. And that influence can be negative, the study suggests.

While much previous research has suggested that students who form social connections on campus are more likely to be retained, this study found that students who place a high priority (in their decision to go to college) on meeting and interacting with peers tend to earn lower grades than do students for whom that is a lesser motivation. The negative impact is greater for males than for females.

Guiffrida said that learning which new students are focused (perhaps too focused) on meeting people can enable advisers to try to steer such students away from too much socializing.

The research was conducted at the Warner School of Education at Rochester, by Guiffrida, fellow professors Martin Lynch and Andrew Wall, and a doctoral student, Darlene Abel.

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**Links:**

[1] <http://www.warner.rochester.edu/files/news/files/academicsuccess.pdf>

[2] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/2012/07/06/researchers-apply-hope-theory-boost-college-student-success>

[3] <http://www.insidehighered.com/news/news-sections/hot-ideas>