WHAT IMPACTS SUCCESS IN COLLEGE? FINDINGS FROM THE PERCEPTIONS OF KOREAN STUDENTS

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The purpose of this study is to identify the factors influencing Korean college students' academic success. To address this aim, 46 Korean students, all juniors in their Bachelors of Arts, who earned a GPA of above 4.0/4.3 were interviewed. The interview questions included: "What factors relate to your academic success?" and "What is the most important factor that contributes to successful academic performance?" Student responses were analyzed by the program Krkwic (Korean Key Words In Context). The Krkwic program analyzes the narrative data and calculates word frequency to find major themes in the interviews. As a result, the top three concepts that most frequently appeared in the interviews were 1) self-regulation and time management, 2) note taking, and 3) goal orientations. Identifying these factors can be useful for college students, faculties, and higher education administrators in providing a helpful guide that will maximize the chances that college students will be successful.

Keywords: College students, Academic success, Self-regulation, Krkwic program.

Educators have long considered the role of facilitators in college students' academic performance and success. Much early research (e.g., Beatty, 2003; Girija, 1985; Morgan, 1976) on such achievement pursued lines of inquiry that separated intellectual and non-intellectual factors on academic performance. Especially within the university and college setting, researchers considered students' intelligence as the main determinant of academic success (Kim, 2003). Since the 1980s, however, most scholarship instead offers a sustained focus on both intellectual and non-intellectual factors, and how such factors jointly influence college students' learning and academic achievement (Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002). In other words, researchers now recognize both the intellectual and non-intellectual factors necessary for success within the higher education environment.

A growing body of scholars argues that in fact non-intellectual factors influence college students' academic performance and success more than intellectual ones (Kim & Kim, 2005). Multiple studies have shown that differences in intellectual ability account for only part of the variability in academic performance found among college students. Manning, Killen, and Taylor (1993), for instance, reported a significant relationship does not exist between intellectual variables and the GPA of a group of 252 undergraduates. Steinmayr (2011) also noted in his research that intelligence does not predict college students'
Impact of Non-intellectual Factors on Academic Success

A significant amount of research shows the critical importance of non-intellectual factors on academic success. For example, Ren (2011) reports that having chosen a major field of study before entering college motivates students to perform at a higher level. Ren's study thus indicates that with a constant scholastic aptitude, students who reported that they had selected a major before entering college performed better than those who reported no such choice. Additionally, Sakiz (2012) suggests that supports from an instructor significantly predict college students' academic emotions, motivation, and ultimately their performance. Furthermore, ample evidence suggests that students are likely to be influenced positively by factors such as students' learning strategies (Lynch, 2010; Soares, 2009), students' achievement motivation (Ahmad & Rana, 2012; Talbot, 1990), teaching strategies (Bartz & Miller, 1991; Donche, 2013), the interaction between students and the faculty (Komarraju, 2010; McDonald, 1984), and peer supports (McCurdy & Cole, 2013; Rybov, 2013).

Such studies, however, also have emphasized a limited number of non-intellectual variables that appear to have a strong impact on college students' academic performance and success. Moreover, previous studies have focused much attention on environmental factors (e.g., climate of academic program, college support, students-faculty relationship, impact of peer group, and teaching strategies) rather than students' individual factors (e.g., personality, study habits, and psychosocial factors such as depression or anxiety, Ting, 1997; Weyandt, 2013). The relatively small amount of research (Killen, 1994; Komarraju & Nadler, 2013) that examines the individual variables of college students has reported that some of the most important variables for academic success are self-efficacy, self-discipline, and resilience. A study conducted by Levi, Einav, Ziv, Raskind and Margalit (2013) found that many college students explained their success or failure in terms of academic effort and hope, and that orientation and expectation were the most common factors in academic achievement.

Korean College Students' Academic Success

When admitted to an institution of higher education, Korean students are tacitly assumed to be capable of achieving success at the university level. In addition, most assume that students who perform above average on their college matriculation exam will be capable of successfully completing each course in which they enroll. Many of these highly capable students, however, encounter serious difficulties in obtaining academic achievement (Center for Campus Life and Culture at Seoul National University, 2009). A study undertaken by Center for Campus Life and Culture at Seoul National University (2009) indicated that almost 30% of the students perceived their academic concerns as a most important issue in campus life. The study also revealed that college juniors in particular faced the most difficulties with their academic performance. According to this research, the third year of college may require students to engage most fully in their academic pursuits, thus significantly increasing students' stress over grades. Tinto (1993) also suggested that the important issues for freshmen and sophomores may be crucially different for students further along in their college careers.
Further research therefore should focus on college students who have concerns about their grades and career; specifically, this research should examine juniors, a group that focuses largely on academic performance and success, rather than seniors, who tend to be more career oriented.

According to Goduka (1996), students entering universities have a wide range of cultural, economic, and social backgrounds, which give them totally different educational opportunities and life experiences. Since those different backgrounds create a variety of academic potential, expectations, and needs, it is hard to draw specific conclusions as to which variables play a critical role in college students' academic performance and which do not. Therefore, while emphasizing the college learners' individual variables, this study will identify and determine the most important non-intellectual factors that influence Korean college students' academic success. Identifying these factors will benefit the academic progress of college students and will draw useful implications for faculties and higher education administrators.

The following research questions were addressed:

**Research Question 1**

What factors relate to college students' academic success?

**Research Question 2**

What is the most important factor that contributes to college students' successful academic performance?

**Method**

**Participants**

In this study, forty-six Korean students were selected for the purposes of identifying which factors influence college students' academic success. The participants were juniors at Seoul National University, all of whom earned a GPA above 4.0/4.3. We selected participants with this GPA range based on the evidence of previous research (e.g., Lee, Kim & Jang, 1986; Park, 2005); college students with a GPA average above 4.0 have been labeled as high achievers. A number of studies that have explored the success of Korean college students have also correlated the factors thought to be associated with academic success with a grade point average above 4.0; such studies have a success rate of almost 93%.

**Instrument and Procedure**

This study used the concepts and methodological techniques of network analysis. According to Rogers and Kincaid (1981), network analysis is a research method that identifies the main idea in data—in this case the interview transcription—based on the relationships among the components. Network analysis enables researchers to determine the frequency of prominent terms or concepts in a communicative context. From the social network perspective, Leydesdorff (2003) locates semantic associations as a crucial element of content analysis because the prominent terms of a message create special meanings that are symbolic or cognitive concepts. Thus, the frequency of prominent words becomes a significant main idea in the text (Park & Leydesdorff, 2004).

Our study interviewed 46 participants who responded to the following open-ended question: "What factors relate to your academic success?" and "What is the most important factor that contributes to successful academic performance?" This investigation aimed to identify the prominent factors related to Korean college students' perceptions of academic success. The Krkwic (Korean Key Words in Context) program, which is used to assess narrative data, analyzed the students' responses. As Park and Leydesdorff (2004) note, KrKwic runs network algorithms to classify texts through meaningful conceptual
groupings and then finds prominent terms in the selected messages. This KrKwic program operationally defines prominent words as concepts that appear frequently in the various forms of narrative data (Park & Leydesdorff, 2004). Because the frequency of words represents the college students’ prominent thoughts and leads towards the uncovering of major concepts in a given message, we can productively use frequency by itself as primary tool in this study.

**Results**

The interviews revealed three primary concepts related to academic success: self-control with time management, note taking, and goal orientations. Based on the results of KrKwic program analysis, the participants referred to the concepts of “self-control with time management” 101 times, “note-taking” 87 times, and “goal orientation” 68 times respectively.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Self-control with time management</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Note taking</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Goal orientation</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Preparing and reviewing the class</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Mind mapping</td>
<td>53</td>
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<td>6</td>
<td>Focus in class</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Peer supports</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Strong memory</td>
<td>16</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>Critical thinking</td>
<td>15</td>
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The students also attributed their academic success to preparing and reviewing the class materials, and making mind maps. KrKwic program analysis revealed that participants mentioned those two concepts more than 50 times in their interviews. Additionally, participants reported that persistent and focused study in class, support from peers, creativity, the ability to memorize, and critical thinking were perceived as important variables for achieving academic success in college.

**Discussion**

*Self-control with Time Management*

Because faculty expect college students to be independent learners, the students, to be successful in universities, should have an ability to operate effective “self-regulatory systems or plan” (Mischel, 1973). To achieve this, college students need to balance their needs for achievement with their needs for affiliation (Mischel, 1973). In addition, they are required to possess a strong sense of both self-control and time management; and finally they should derive some enjoyment from activities for academic success (Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy & Welsh, 2009).

In our study, participants mentioned the concepts of “self-control with time management” 101 times. This demonstrates students strongly agree that “self-control with time management” contributes to success while a “lack of self-control” leads to failure. Participants reported that they even schedule time to eat, rest, and meet their friends. They stated in their interviews that self-control with concrete time management is the most significant variable guiding their academic success. The students in this study indicated that many other students who earned low GPA did not have this type of effective self-regulatory or time management system. Rather, they see themselves as operating in an environment largely regulated by others especially their parents. This perception may be partly attributed to their previous educational experiences. In other word, Korean parents often make educational decisions for their children and, in doing so, tend to base their choices on their own assumptions or values rather than their children’s desires (Chen, 2004). Additionally, there is little evidence that the Korean college
students’ secondary education system, where most of these students had been successful, focus on self-regulation, self-efficacy, and independent decision-making (De Villiers & Rwigema, 1998). In conclusion, the college students believed that they could have successful academic performance in universities due to their self-regulatory system and effective time management.

Note Taking

In Korea, students usually take notes in the classroom while the teacher provides instruction. These students are accustomed to earning good grades through the memorization of information in textbooks, class notes, and other reading those materials (Aubrey, 1991). Therefore, often understood as the distinguishing characteristic university-level learning, note-taking is assumed by many to be a common skill that college students have or will acquire by a process of trial and error (Van der Meer, 2012). Numerous studies, have also noted note-taking’s crucial roles in college students’ academic performance. According to Dunkel and Davy (1989), taking notes while listening to a lecture is an important strategy that students use widely for increasing attention and retaining content. Bonner (2006) also indicated that note-taking helps students record, clarify, organize, and understand important information emphasized during classes rather than merely depending on their memories.

In our study, participants referred to note-taking 87 times in their interviews. They reported that the goal of note taking is to maintain direct attention as well as to facilitate the process of understanding and organizing material presented in class. One the more interesting results, this study found that Korean college students preferred to note everything discussed in class such as the faculty’s jokes and unnecessary information instead of only noting select and important material. Students reported that minor information could be the clue to recalling important content.

Goal Orientations

Goal orientation is defined as situated orientations for action in achievement tasks (Ames, 1992). Ames (1992) proposed two general concepts of goal orientations and labeled them mastery and performance goal orientations. According to Ames (1992), mastery goal orientation is “developing new skills, trying to understand their work, improving their level of competence or achieving a sense of mastery based on self-referenced standards”, while performance goal orientation is “focusing on their ability and self-worth, to determine their ability with reference to besting other students, surpassing others, and republic recognition for their superior performance” (p.262). Across previous research on goal orientation, most researchers (e.g., Pintrich & Schunk, 2002; Shin, 1992) accept the general theoretical assumption that a sense of goal orientation fosters college students’ cognitive, motivational, and achievement outcomes.

In our study, participants mentioned the concept of “goal orientation” 68 times. The students reports that when they focus on learning materials and try to enhance their academic performance, a sense of goal orientation is useful. Their perceptions of goal orientation included both mastery and performance goal orientations. They reveal that goal orientation helps them diminish the probability of distracting thoughts, prevent negative emotions such as uneasiness and anxiety, keep their self-efficacy when they face with academic failure, and encourage them to do better than others, therefore, allowing for more engagement and achievement. In summary, the college students suggest that goal orientation positively relates to their academic success as well as their engagement and study skills.
Conclusion

As the results of this study demonstrate, self-control with effective time management, note-taking strategies, and goal orientation are three the most important non-intellectual factors. Therefore, we might attribute academic failure primarily to poor time management, lack of note-taking strategies, and inadequate goal setting. Identifying and explaining the non-intellectual factors that influence Korean college students' academic success would help students, advisers, and higher education administrators in promoting academic progress. Our results can provide a basis for assisting college students to reflect on their expectations and perceptions of learning so that they can obtain more control over their academic performance so as to maximize their chances of success. In addition, faculty and higher education administrators can use this study to be more aware of the methods to assist college students with low academic performance, allowing them the chance to recognize their problems and the opportunity for early academic services.

The current study has the long-term goal of enhancing the academic success rates of college students. We believe that students and faculty have a joint responsibility for academic accomplishment and that the first stage in accepting this responsibility is to have a better understanding of the complex processes that influence academic success. This study represents another step towards that goal, and provides an opportunity for college students to reflect on their perceptions and expectations of learning so that they can maximize their chances of academic success. Because there are so many students who struggle to perform academically, this study can help students gain more control over their education and make faculties and administrators in higher education more informed about the strategies for enhancing a chance of students' academic success. Finally, we believe that our study results can prove meaningful in prediction studies and in identifying low and high achievers in need of advising in universities and colleges.

Limitations and Future Research

This study has two possible limitations. First, this study targeted college junior students who earned a GPA above 4.0/4.3 at Seoul National University in Korea and therefore, the results of this study may not apply as much to students outside the GPA range or to those enrolled in other universities. Second, we based this research on college students' perceptions of variables that contribute to academic success and not on the measurement of actual performance. Therefore, the timing of data collection may impact participants' perception of facilitating factors, meaning that their perception of factors could differ at other points in time. Future research should attempt to link college students' expectations with their actual academic performance; doing so would offer an opportunity to explore numerous significant issues that surfaced in this study.
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What Impacts Success in College? / 167


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