“I Came in Unsure of Everything”: Community College Students’ Shifts in Confidence

Susan Bickerstaff Melissa Barragan Zawadi Rucks-Ahidiana

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Abstract

To improve low rates of credential attainment in community colleges, individual schools as well as a number of national organizations have developed a range of initiatives focused on increasing rates of college completion and student success. Although the importance of non-academic factors in college completion and student success has been well established, questions remain about the best ways to structure the community college environment to foster students’ sense of belonging and promote behaviors that are associated with success.

This paper addresses this gap in the literature by focusing on the academic confidence of students at the outset of their community college careers, the ways in which their confidence may impact student behaviors and persistence, and how student confidence is affected by students’ experiences in college. Using data from nearly 100
community college student interviews, this paper examines students’ descriptions of their confidence upon entering college and of the shifts in confidence they experienced early in their college careers.

Our findings suggest that student confidence is shaped in part by past academic experiences and expectations of college upon entry. Using student descriptions of their perceptions of college and of themselves, we describe the characteristics of students who describe themselves as self-assured and those who identify as apprehensive. The interview data reveal that student confidence is continually shifting as a result of interactions with peers, faculty, and others. Our analysis also indicates that academic confidence can impact student motivation and academic behaviors that are associated with success. Importantly, this paper identifies the nature of those experiences that positively reinforce student confidence, events that we term *experiences of earned success*. Finally, we describe ways to structure classroom and other on-campus environments to create opportunities for students to experience earned success and ultimately enhance their commitment to academic pursuits.

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6. Discussion and Implications

The findings presented in this paper confirm existing research suggesting that academic identity and confidence are socially constructed at the intersection of personal history and expectations for success. As has been suggested in previous research, when students do not expect to be successful they are less motivated and less likely to exert effort, and they may adjust their aspirations and engage in self-defeating behaviors to avoid failure (e.g., Cox, 2009). If their confidence is tied to a lack of information about the expectations of college, they may not engage in appropriate self-regulatory behaviors that lead to success (e.g., Yeager et al., 2011). Students reported that their confidence stemmed from success in particular subject areas, as well as from their ability to navigate the non-academic demands of college (i.e., interacting with professors and accessing support services). These findings therefore confirm recent research suggesting that helping students deliberately hone their academic and non-academic skills may improve students’ potential for success (O’Gara et al., 2008).

Like students profiled elsewhere (e.g., Law, 1995; Rendón, 2002; Villalpando, 2003), the students we interviewed faced a number of challenges in calibrating their perceptions of college and of themselves as they entered postsecondary education. Some were apprehensive because of previous negative educational experiences, expectations that college would be challenging, and a lack of preparedness. Many were misinformed about the demands of college, and for some those misperceptions were associated with self-assurance. One important strength of the current study is that it explores the shifting nature of the confidence of community college students in ways that have not been done
before. Specifically, we identify how experiences of destabilization and experiences of earned success, which reveal to students the connection between their own efforts and subsequent outcomes, can affect confidence and encourage or discourage positive academic habits.

The shifts in confidence described in this analysis demonstrate the ways in which confidence is continually reconstructed through interactions and academic experiences. During their interviews, students described multiple shifts in confidence across various subject areas. For example, some students who entered with self-assurance in a particular area described experiences of destabilization followed by experiences of earned success, suggesting a roller coaster of changing confidence over just a few short months. Based on these data and rates of student attrition in community college, even among students who persist into a second semester, we hypothesize that multiple, ongoing experiences of earned success may be necessary to maintain academic confidence.

The data highlight the potential of specific types of interactions with professors and staff to encourage positive academic behaviors and prevent the cooling of student aspirations. In the sections that follow, we discuss ways in which individual faculty members as well as departments and the college more broadly can create opportunities for students to earn success, calibrate their confidence appropriately, and develop positive perceptions of themselves as learners.

6.1 Earned Success in the Classroom

When students in our interviews recounted experiences of earned success, they showed awareness of the connection between their academic habits and positive results. Teacher feedback, in the form of grades, written comments, and verbal exchanges, was an important way for students to recognize their success in the classroom. This evidence suggests that faculty members can structure experiences of earned success for students by making the results of students’ efforts transparent to them. For example, students may benefit from constructive feedback (i.e., beyond a simple “good job”) that shows how their work is connected to performance. Without feedback, students in our sample found it harder to measure their progress and were likely to make assumptions about their abilities that may or may not have been well informed or accurate. It was through regular
and timely positive and negative feedback that students calibrated their expectations for college and adjusted their behaviors.

While negative feedback in the form of poor grades may be damaging if it calls into question students’ ability to succeed and persist in college, our data suggest that there is danger in lowering expectations or in decreasing standards for student success. Most students in this study reported that they expected college to be challenging and that challenging course material coupled with support provided motivation to succeed. As one student explained, “It is hard but I like being challenged a little bit.” Thus, we argue for a number of strategies to facilitate opportunities for students to experience success, even as they practice and acquire new skills. For example, instructors may begin a course with an ungraded assignment to offer students low-stakes opportunities to practice employing the skills necessary for success in the course. By breaking a large, high-stakes assignment into its component parts, faculty can scaffold student learning and offer feedback more frequently with fewer repercussions for students’ grades.

Interviewees’ reliance on teacher feedback to gauge their learning suggests that students need additional opportunities to learn how to reflect on their work process and product. Learning how to self-assess gives students additional information about their progress and can be particularly useful for students who have little information about how to calibrate their academic behaviors to the demands of college (Karp & Bork, 2012). Likewise, if apprehensive students can learn to associate performance with effort rather than with innate characteristics or talent, they may be more likely to persist (Dweck, 2006). Asking students to reflect on the amount of effort they expended on a task or to evaluate their work against a rubric developed by the class can help students become more cognizant of the relationship between their academic behaviors and the grades they receive.

Finally, instructors across disciplines may also foster student success by providing opportunities for guided practice of academic skills such as notetaking and study techniques. When students in our sample experienced success after applying these skills, they reported increases in their academic confidence and an intention to employ them again. Similarly, accessing support was an area of concern for apprehensive students, as they expressed trepidation about their ability to interact appropriately with professors and
other staff on campus. Thus faculty can support students in class by embedding supports for students—such as tutoring or required attendance at office hours—into the structure of the course.

In sum, findings from this study suggest that instructors in all disciplines can create opportunities for students to experience earned success by helping them identify their own strengths and needs, providing guided practice on strategies to accomplish challenging tasks, and offering constructive feedback. In doing so, students can learn how to self-manage the challenges they encounter and maintain or develop their academic confidence and expectations for success.

6.2 College Structures to Support Success

Comprehensive college-wide approaches to supporting and serving students can also help foster confidence. The data in this paper demonstrate how students’ lack of knowledge and misperceptions of college impacted their confidence upon entry. Therefore, colleges should make greater efforts to provide students with realistic information about college expectations. This may happen through partnerships with high schools or through programs on campus. For example, the colleges in our study offered student success courses, required in students’ first semester of study. These courses hold promise in helping students develop the academic habits (e.g., study skills and time management), self-assessment skills, and help-seeking behaviors that are associated with positive outcomes (Karp et al., 2012). Our analysis indicates that experiences of earned success occur when students apply success strategies and can see the result of their efforts. Thus, student success courses, workshops, or other orientation programs should not merely inform students about academic habits, but should also provide opportunities for students to practice and employ the knowledge and skills they learn in real academic settings.

However, given that students’ confidence appears to shift continually and that experiences of earned success appear to be domain specific (i.e., in a particular subject, or related to the use of a particular strategy), we hypothesize that short-term interventions may not result in sustained changes to student confidence (Karp et al., 2012). For instance, students may not understand the relevance of a particular service or skill
because they have not yet identified an area of concern. As indicated by the data presented above, students encounter new challenges as their college careers progress, and new habits, skills, and strategies will be necessary for achievement. Thus, we suggest that students may benefit from ongoing opportunities to develop and practice their skills. Such opportunities may include intrusive supports that require students to interface with academic advisors, tutors, and other student services or student success workshops and activities that engage students within and beyond their first semester.

Finally, it is clear from our analysis that many experiences of earned success occur in the classroom as a result of interactions with individual professors. Students interact with faculty throughout their college careers, so instructors play a critical role in mediating student confidence. Yet most faculty are disciplinary experts with little training in how to support student non-academic needs. Therefore, colleges may need to offer learning opportunities for instructors to develop strategies to create experiences of earned success for the students in their classes.