

Is Living in a Residential College Associated with Academic Motivation?

Abstract

As part of a larger project, the purpose of the current study was to investigate whether the academic motivation of first-year college students changes within and across time and living arrangements. The primary finding is that the academic motivation of first-year college students who lived in a residential college was increased between the beginning and end of the first semester and sustained between the end of the first and second semesters. The major implication is that living-learning programs might be better designed if they extended beyond the first semester of the freshman year.

All students in the College of Agriculture (CoA) at a southern public university take a one-hour introductory course (referred to here as CoA 101) in the first semester of their first year. Students who live in the Agriculture Residential College (ARC) were enrolled in a special section of CoA 101. In addition, ARC students were enrolled in another one-hour extended introductory course the next semester designed to further explore careers in Agriculture and develop their communication skills and ability to work as a team, thus extending the first-year co-curricular experience for the entire academic year. The CoA of interest comprises traditional agricultural majors, including pre-veterinary medicine, as well as some of those in the human and environmental sciences.

Purpose

The purpose of the current study was to investigate whether the academic motivation of first-year college students changes within and across time and living arrangements.

Hypotheses

- (1) Students who lived in a residential college had different changes in academic motivation than students who did not live in a residential college during their first semester of college; and,
- (2) The academic motivation of students who lived in a residential college changed over time during their first year of college.



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Method

Sample and data collection. At the beginning of the 2012-13 academic year, the class of CoA first-year students comprised 330, 113 of whom lived in ARC and 217 who lived either in another residence hall on campus or off campus. Following IRB approval and on the first day of class, students in both sections of CoA 101 completed a pre-survey that included an assessment of their academic motivation. Ninety-eight percent of the ARC students and ninety-three percent of the non-ARC students completed the pre-survey.

During the last class period of their CoA 101 course, students completed a similar post-survey1 that included the same academic motivation scale. Seventy-three percent of the ARC students and sixty-four percent of the non-ARC students completed post-survey1. In addition, 60 percent of ARC students completed a similar survey (post-survey2) at the end of the second semester, again during the last class period.

Academic motivation was measured by an adapted version of Vallerand et al.'s (1992) Academic Motivation Scale, with a 16-item assessment. The seven-point response set ranged from "does not correspond at all" to "corresponds exactly." Three variables were computed by summing the scores of all of the items from each wave of data collection. Three additional variables ("motivation change scores") were computed by subtracting (1) the pre-survey scores from the post-survey1 scores, (2) the pre-survey scores from the post-survey2 scores, and (3) the post-survey1 scores from the post-survey2 scores. T-test analyses were conducted to test the hypotheses.

Findings

The results of the paired t-test revealed that students in both sections of CoA 101 reported higher academic motivation scores between the beginning and the end of their first semester at college. The t-statistic for the ARC section was 2.32 (a p-value = .02); the t-statistic for the non-ARC section was 2.67 (p-value = .01). The results of the independent samples t-test revealed no differences in the changes in motivation between the two CoA 101 sections. The t-test analysis of ARC students only revealed that they reported significantly higher academic motivation scores between the beginning and end of their first year of college ($t=2.62, p=.01$). Students did not, however, report significantly higher academic motivation scores between the end of the first and second semesters.

Although the academic motivation increased for both groups of students, the differences between the groups was not statistically significant. Thus, the first hypothesis was not supported. The second hypothesis was partially supported. The reported gains in academic motivation over time were sustained, but did not change significantly in the second semester.

Discussion and Conclusions

Results suggest that, at least for the group considered here, too little time elapses during a single semester for a learning community to make a difference in academic motivation. Perhaps the sheer intensity of workload and sensory overload from the experience prevents students from fully appreciating their progress, especially with the stress of their first university-level set of final exams looming. Results also evoke a sense that the semester break may be even more important than previously realized, as a time for re-assessment and reinvigoration. Another possibility is that enlightenment about the importance of their living-learning experience is only realized after the beginning of the second semester, after the program has begun to feel more comfortable; in such a case, even the stress of final exams at the end of the second-semester survey might have not played a role in obscuring the students' view of the value of the living-learning experience for enhancing their academic motivation.

Results should be interpreted with caution. First, the data only includes students from one academic year. Second, although all of the living-learning students lived on the same wing of the residence hall, the hall in which the living-learning program students lived was shared with non-living-learning program students. Third, students with lower academic motivation might have opted out of the residential college program or did not regularly attend class the spring semester.

Future research should include more years of data with more cohort and control groups. Are agriculture students similar to students from other majors in their perception of the role of their living-learning community on their own academic motivation? And finally, do differences exist in student assessment of the role of their living-learning community as a source of their academic motivation? Practitioners might design living-learning programs that extend beyond the first semester of the freshman year.

Reference

Vallerand, R. J., Pelletier, L. G., Blais, M. R., Brière, N. M., Senécal, C. & Vallières, E.F. (1992). The academic motivation scale: A measure of intrinsic, extrinsic, and amotivation in education. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 52, 1003–1017.