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The Connection between Role Model Relationships and Self-Direction in Developmental Students

Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative study that used classroom observations, faculty interviews, and student interviews to investigate the meaning and importance of seven non-cognitive variables to a cohort of developmental writing students at an urban community college. The variables studied included finances, study management, college surroundings, views of self, views of education, motivation, and interpersonal relationships. Findings indicated that participants who discussed having or being a role model described self-directed and self-motivated approaches to education, while participants who lacked these relationships described an external locus of control and issues with learned helplessness. These results indicate that the experience of having a role model or the desire to serve as a role model to others may provide greater security and increased self-concept for developmental students, encouraging the type of self-direction and motivation that facilitates educational success. Specific suggestions for future programs including counseling, mentoring, and pedagogical approaches and recommendations for future research are offered.

Introduction

Developmental students in community colleges across the country experience a wide range of challenges in their pursuit of higher education. Not only do these students lack the basic skills necessary to experience educational success in college-level courses, but also they must overcome a great deal of difficulties in areas that are not directly related to their skill level. Researchers have found that course grades and retention are closely related to student demographics, behavior, and personality style in addition to non-cognitive variables such as affective, situational, emotional, psychosocial, attitudinal, and dispositional factors (Boylan, 2009; Bryant, 2001; Liff, 2003). While most researchers agree that non-cognitive variables are influential to student success, they often disagree regarding which variables are most important to students and the impact that those variables can have on grades and retention. In order to implement programs that address the particular needs of developmental students, the ways in which these students experience non-cognitive variables and the importance that these variables hold *for them* must be understood and addressed (Barbatis, 2010; Doucette & Hughes, 1990; Grimes & David, 1999; Morante, 1994; Simpson, Hynd, & Nist, 1997).

To begin to fill this gap, I conducted an exploratory study that provides in-depth descriptions of the experiences of a cohort of developmental students with a set of non-cognitive variables that are most often mentioned as influential to educational success in the developmental education literature. My goal was to develop a deeper understanding of the importance that non-cognitive factors hold for a group of developmental writing students through intently listening to students' own voices and through closely examining in-depth descriptions of students' experiences. Because this study was largely exploratory and included open-ended interview questions, many patterns in the non-cognitive experiences of students emerged from the data. For the purpose of this paper, I focus on one particularly striking pattern, namely the connection between the presence of a role model relationship in the developmental

students' lives and degree to which the students were self-directed in their approach to education.

Non-Cognitive Variables

Educators and administrators cannot determine what developmental students need or which program components might address those needs without first understanding how students experience non-cognitive variables (Crews & Aragon, 2007; Boylan, 1999; Colton, Connor, Shultz, & Easter, 1999; Morante, 1994). A review of the developmental education literature indicates that researchers describe many non-cognitive variables related to a student's surroundings or external environment and to a student's emotions, expression of feelings, and interactions and relationships in society as important to educational experiences. Although many non-cognitive variables are mentioned in the literature, these variables are most often either situational (related to circumstantial or environmental factors) or socioaffective (related to dispositional, attitudinal, psychosocial, personal, or emotional factors) in nature.

Most of the literature in non-cognitive aspects of developmental students' experiences does not involve field research but instead includes conceptual descriptions of the developmental student population. According to this literature, the situational factors that influence the experiences of developmental students are often described as creating an entanglement of inconveniences, complications, aggravations, and possible obstacles to educational success; however, researchers tend to disagree regarding which situational factors are most influential. Some authors discuss the ability of developmental students to negotiate and manage their college environments, often describing difficulties in value clarification and in the management of academic affairs such as registration, financial aid, navigating and negotiating their way through the college campus, and course planning (Boylan, 2009; Damashek, 1999; Escobedo, 2007; Horn, 1997; Liff, 2003; McCabe, 2003; McCusker, 1999; Roueche & Roueche, 1999). Other authors emphasize issues with time conflicts and the ability to find time to complete assignments and attend class while balancing financial obligations, employment, student status, and family responsibilities as most important to students' educational experiences (Bolge, 1994; Roueche & Roueche, 1993).

The conceptual literature on non-cognitive variables also names various combinations of socioaffective factors that interact in complicated ways to influence developmental students' experiences. Developmental students are most often described as rejecting help, experiencing anxiety, fearing failure, being passive learners, lacking motivation, self-esteem, and engagement, and having a weak self-concept and uncertain goals, all of which may hinder their academic progress (Hawley & Harris, 2005-2006; Hirsch, 1994; Maxwell, 1997). The past negative educational experiences of developmental students may have contributed to a lack of personal autonomy, negative views of learning, or distrust of teachers, which can lead to attitudinal difficulties, resistance, and defiance in the classroom (Hirsch, 1994; Mealey, 1990). Having experienced disappointing failure in the past, a developmental student may also be paralyzed by anticipated failure, may avoid repeated disappointment by orchestrating the failure himself (through accepting a difficult task that he knows he cannot complete) or by choosing the easiest task because he knows he will not fail (Maxwell, 1997; Roueche & Roueche, 1993; Roueche & Roueche, 1999). The interaction among factors related to self-esteem, previous school experience, and views of failure may cause developmental students to believe that their effort has no influence over their educational success and instead to blame external factors for their academic performance. Factors related to self-esteem, writing anxiety, fear of failure, and views of education can cause students to feel overwhelmed, anxious, frustrated, disappointed, and angry about aspects of their college experience (Horn, 1997; Liff, 2003). Other authors also describe difficulties with social competence, social skills, and

cooperativeness in discussions of developmental student experiences in post-secondary education (Boylan, 1999; Horn, 1997; Kozeracki, 2002; Liff, 2003).

Qualitative research that has focused on non-cognitive variables has also indicated that situational and socioaffective variables shape developmental students' educational experiences. Despite the fact that most participants of qualitative studies are university students, several studies have produced interesting findings regarding the ways in which developmental students experience some non-cognitive variables. In one study, Valeri-Gold, Callahan, Deming, & Mangram (1997) found that developmental students experienced difficulties integrating with peers, connecting with teachers, arranging financial aid, and scheduling classes; pressures in financial, personal, social, work, and academic areas; and fear of failing classes, losing focus, dealing with stress, disappointing family members, being disliked, or being exposed as stupid. Retention studies of drop outs from the same cohort indicated that students had left the program for affective and situational reasons rather than academic difficulty (Errico et al., 2000). In addition, a study of retained students from this cohort indicated that financial, emotional, and parent and peer support had most contributed to student success (Valeri-Gold, Kearse, & Deming, 2001). In another interview study, Yaworski, Weber, & Ibrahim (2000) also found that less successful developmental students experienced more difficulties with motivation, good study habits, perseverance, self-efficacy, self-regulatory behavior, and feelings of powerlessness. Similarly, Beach, Lundell, & Jung (2002) found that developmental students experienced low self-esteem, constant feelings of stress, time conflicts, and difficulties with supporting their children, financing their education, and finding time for interaction with peers. Very few qualitative studies focus on the experiences of developmental students with non-cognitive variables at two-year colleges; however, in one such study, Barbatis (2010) found that non-cognitive variables including pre-college characteristics, social involvement, external college support, community influence, and academic integration influenced the persistence of developmental students.

Although correlational research also often focuses on students at four-year colleges, some studies have also provided useful information regarding the possible influences of non-cognitive variables on student success and retention. These studies often discuss factors related to motivation, views of learning, social competence, interpersonal caring, and students' feelings of self, particularly self-confidence, self-regulation, and self-efficacy (Hennessey, 1990; Hill, 1999; Visor, Johnson, & Cole, 1994). Some retention studies have also shown that factors including student-institution incongruence, socio-economic status, isolation, career confusion, lack of family support, lack of motivation, psychiatric problems, and low self-esteem are associated with drop out decisions for developmental students (Hoyt, 1999; Nora et al., 1996; Thornley & Clarke, 1998; Visor, Johnson, & Cole, 1994; Windham, 1995). Some research has also attempted to define the non-cognitive needs of developmental students through comparing their scores on assessment instruments to the scores of college-ready students. In one study, using the Motivated Strategies for Learning Questionnaire (MSLQ), Moore (2007) found that developmental education students scored lower in areas such as learner beliefs, time management, and self-efficacy. Valeri-Gold, Deming, Callahan, Mangram, & Errico (1998) also found that developmental students' scores fell below the norm in academic adjustment, social adjustment, personal-emotional adjustment, and goal commitment/institutional attachment based on the Student Adaptation to College Questionnaire (SACQ). The few studies of developmental students at two-year colleges that do exist emphasize self-efficacy, motivation, and interpersonal skills as important factors. In one such study, Smith & Price (1996) found that developmental students tended to blame external factors for the degree to which they succeeded in school, and similarly, Grimes & David (1999) found that underprepared students scored significantly lower

in self-ratings of academic ability, intellectual self-confidence, emotional health, cooperativeness, achievement drive, and understanding of others. However, these findings are also complicated by studies that have found that developmental students do not experience increased difficulties in self-direction, motivation, anxiety, or concentration and that personal attributes, personality, and background do not significantly influence their drop out decisions (Hawley & Harris, 2005-2006; Keeton, Clagett, & Engleberg, 1998; Ley & Young, 1998; Lipsky, 2000; Phillips, 2001)

No study adequately explores the ways in which developmental students experience non-cognitive variables through the use of field research in a community college setting. Much of the research that does exist is contradictory, complicating the ability of administrators and educators to use these results to inform developmental program design. While many non-cognitive variables are named as influential, which non-cognitive variables are important to students and the ways in which these variables impact student experiences remain unclear. Researchers in the field emphasize the need for qualitative studies that listen more directly to students' voices and perceptions of their own college experiences (Higbee, Arendale, & Lundell, 2005; Yaworski, Weber, & Ibrahim, 2000). More research that examines factors related to student attitudes, beliefs, identity, self-perceptions, and motivation is needed in order to improve developmental education programs. This understanding might allow educators and administrators to better serve developmental students through comprehensive support in pursuit of their educational goals.

Methods

This study provides in-depth descriptions of the importance of a set of non-cognitive variables to developmental students' experiences in a community college setting. My goal was to listen to students' own voices in their descriptions of their experiences with education in order to explore the influence that these factors may have and to investigate which factors facilitate and hinder students' academic success. Because researchers name so many different non-cognitive variables as possibly influential to student success, I closely examined the developmental education literature in order to determine the most appropriate set of non-cognitive variables for this study's focus. I reviewed articles catalogued in educational databases that related to the needs assessment of developmental college students at all post-secondary settings with a primary focus on studies since 1990, and I recorded the study designs, non-cognitive factors named, and any results related to the importance of those factors as reported in these articles. This review indicated that studies of non-cognitive variables most often discuss various combinations of **finances** (e.g., financial aid, employment, family structure), **college surroundings** (e.g., classroom conditions, transportation, facilities), and **study management** (e.g., balancing school with other responsibilities, creating a study space, managing academic affairs) as situational factors that influence the educational experiences of developmental students. The research also most often discusses various combinations of a student's **views of education** (e.g., experiences with teachers, peer support), **views of self** (e.g., self-confidence, self-efficacy), **motivation** (e.g., family encouragement, personal sense of accomplishment), and **interpersonal relationships** (e.g., communication, understanding of others) as socioaffective factors that influence the educational experiences of developmental students. I then conducted a qualitative study which focused on the experiences of a cohort of beginning-level developmental writing students with these seven non-cognitive variables.

The site for this study was a community college that is part of the City University of New York system. Statistics indicate that non-cognitive variables may carry a great deal of importance on the experiences of students at this site. Over 90% of the students enrolled at the site qualify for federal and state aid, and almost all of the students are

first generation college students. In addition, many of the students have children, and about one-third are single parents. Almost half of the students at the site report household incomes of under \$15,000 per year, and the majority work full or part time while trying to maintain enough credits to qualify for financial aid. I also focused this study on students who are currently enrolled in the most beginning level of developmental writing offered at this community college because these students experience higher withdrawal rates (18-20%) and lower pass rates (50-60%) than students at other levels. At this site, there is a need for research that could assist these students in persisting at the college and in succeeding in their developmental courses.

This study included interviews with faculty, classroom observations, and interviews with students. Specifically, I conducted 30-45 minute interviews with 4 faculty members who had knowledge of the history, policies, and programs at the site, and each interview was taped, transcribed, and coded. In order to better understand the context in which learning occurs, I also conducted observations of 6 different sections of this course during three day classes and three night classes. I took detailed field notes with the use of a participant observation protocol focusing on classroom interactions, student participation and engagement, and the ways in which the class was conducted. At the end of each observation, I also introduced my research project and asked students who were interested in being interviewed to provide contact information on a sign-up sheet. Of these sign-up sheets, I randomly selected several participants from each section for a total of 20 student participants. I then conducted semi-structured interviews that focused on the seven non-cognitive variables with each of these students. Interviews lasted from 60-120 minutes, and each interview was taped, transcribed verbatim, and coded to seek thematic connections through codes derived from the developmental education literature and through open coding. I grouped sections of the transcript into categories based on these codes and investigated any similarities and differences among students' responses. I also compared these findings to patterns that had emerged from classroom observations and faculty interviews.

Findings

Students responded to questions regarding their educational experiences in relation to the seven factors most often named in the developmental education literature as influential to students. While participants discussed experiences with all seven non-cognitive variables, they described socioaffective factors more often and in greater detail than situational factors.

Situational Factors

Descriptions of finances included any student mentions of money as it related to their educational experiences in terms of family, peers, and employment. Most often students described paying for their college educations and the affordability of the community college which enabled them to receive a college degree without the time commitment and financial hardship that comes with attending a four-year college. These students wanted to have a college degree because college was important to them for personal growth and career options, and they described how they never had financial stability in their lives. They often sought financially lucrative employment so that they could give back to their families by providing them with material possessions and stable housing. Many students also described the ways in which their parents' experiences with money caused them to want more financial stability for themselves and their present and future children.

Descriptions of college surroundings included student mentions of the circumstances or conditions of the college environment including classroom conditions, the college campus, facilities, and transportation. Several of these students explained that they viewed campus resources and support services as additional work or as an added task for which they lacked the time or desire. Some students who were

unaware of these services explained that they would like to be more informed about what is available and how to access it. They often took responsibility for their lack of awareness by explaining that they had not had time to adequately explore the campus. In response to a question about how college support services (e.g., counseling, daycare, tutoring, financial aid, etc.) could better assist them in meeting their educational goals, many students indicated that they did not expect the college to help them in this area. Life complications related to their schooling and schedules seemed commonplace, and they seemed accustomed to not receiving help prior to their college attendance. Therefore, they did not naturally think of the college as capable of providing financial, emotional, or academic assistance.

Descriptions of study management included student mentions of the ability to balance multiple responsibilities or restructure their environments in order to study. Registering for classes, obtaining financial aid, and locating necessary offices was a hectic, complicated process that often took days to complete for these students. Students were frustrated by not understanding exactly what to do or where to go and they described feeling overwhelmed and lost as they were sent from office to office all over campus. Other students similarly described confusion regarding their score on the placement exam, stated that they had passed it, or expressed that they did not understand the exam's relation to college readiness. Students with children often viewed their families as a source of support in helping them to manage their study time and in ensuring that they stay on task and do well in college. At the same time, however, they often described complicated schedules that required the juggling of multiple responsibilities associated with their roles as parents and students. Many students also described how they do not study either because it is too difficult for them, or they feel they do not need it. The stress of managing their study time effectively was described as tiring and as taking an emotional and physical toll on these students.

Socioaffective Factors

Descriptions of self included any student mentions of their character, beliefs, and personalities, self-awareness, self-worth, self-direction, and resilience. While some students discussed feeling confident in their academic ability, goals for the future, learning progress, and intelligence, many students described feeling unconfident based on the opinions of other people and having doubts about their own intelligence. These students stated that they felt like failures when they could not complete academic tasks at the same level as others and often described themselves using the words "stupid," "dumb," or "not smart" and their performance on exams as unrelated to any action on their part. They expressed difficulties engaging in self-directed behavior in high school and were fearful of oversleeping and missing classes in college. They wanted their teachers to provide them with the right answer and tell them precisely what to do, step by step, and students associated this type of direction with teachers "caring" about them.

Descriptions of education included any student mentions of school in terms of peers, teachers, family, and course content. The majority of students described their college attendance as a means of proving their peers wrong or attempting to be different from their peers. Many of their peers had dropped out of high school, and these participants described the ways in which they had chosen a different path for themselves. Students who wanted to break away from their peers often described themselves as better than their friends because they had chosen a life for themselves that included higher education. Other students in this group described their families as believing that they were headed in the right direction for deciding to go to college. Students with children also often described viewing their education as a means of providing more for their kids and teaching them the value of education. Students often wanted teachers who would coddle them, guide them, and demonstrate that they deeply

cared about students' progress. They described not making an effort in classes where their teachers expected them to copy information and figure things out independently.

Descriptions of motivation included student mentions of their drive or incentive for attending school in terms of family, peers, teachers, and self. Many of these students described returning to education after receiving their high school diplomas or after a period of absence because their families convinced them. Many students also described being motivated by their desire to support their families or serve as an example or role model to younger family members or their children. Some students also reported being motivated by the desire to be different from their families and described pride in being the first in their families to attend college. Motivational teachers were described as encouraging students to push themselves and as varying classroom activities. Nearly all of the students in this sample described their motivation to attend college in order to better themselves, characterizing college education as a powerful tool for life transformation and as a way to be "somebody," do "something," or go "somewhere." Often, motivation to attend college was described as a means of independence and status, so that students would not need to depend on anyone other than themselves.

Descriptions of interpersonal relationships included any student mentions related to conflict resolution, understanding others, and communication with peers, family, and teachers. Some students described positive interpersonal relationships with family, and these interactions were often related to a parent who encouraged the participants to attend school. Most often, relationships with family were described in negative terms, and participants described extremely unstable family environments and negative interactions with family members throughout their childhoods. Often, these descriptions included accounts of students moving repeatedly, switching high schools multiple times, and being raised by relatives or foster parents, separated from their siblings, and even abused. Students described positive relationships with teachers in high school who had put pressure on them, supported them, checked in with them regularly, gave them advice, and knew them on a personal level, and they wanted college professors to get to know them and care about their success. They described histories of negative interactions with peers involving betrayal, violence, cutting classes, and the complication of their educational environments, and they stated that they currently did not have any quality friendships with peers in college. They emphasized the need to look out for themselves and not depend on anyone else, discussed their shyness and distrust of peers, and stated that they disliked working in groups.

Discussion

One particularly striking pattern that emerged from these findings was the connection between the presence of a role model relationship in a student's life and the ways in which that student understands the educational environment. Students in this sample who described having a role model or wanting to serve as a role model for younger family members often also described being self-motivated learners and being less dependent on teacher direction in their approach to learning tasks. In contrast, students who lacked a role model relationship in their lives often described an external locus of control and low self-efficacy.

Students who had a family member who served as their role model often described self-directed and self-motivated views of education. These students were proud to be in college, and they enjoyed the determination and responsibility that college required. Elizabeth explained how living with her mother, whom she described as her role model, had positively affected her education: "It helps make me stronger, because my mom wants me to be somebody. She wants me to finish with my education and I want to do it too." Elizabeth also enjoyed the independence of the college environment stating, "Nobody's pressuring you to come to class... You do it by yourself, and I like

that responsibility because it makes me grow." Elizabeth viewed the need to be self-directed – to wake herself up, get to class on her own, and be on time without any external pressure – as an opportunity for her to "grow," and she enjoyed the personal responsibility. Similarly, Quincy described the positive relationship he had with his father, referring to him as "my best friend" and "my role model." Quincy was also very self-directed in his approach to learning tasks, and stated that even though he disliked his English class, he was motivated to attend because of his views of education: "It's more like a battle to me, there's different steps. You have to study. You have to do your homework...and then...oh, it paid off, and you won that battle." When asked whom he is battling, Quincy responded, "I am battling myself. I mean if you don't study, you don't do your homework, you're not going to do good, but if you do your homework and you fight for what you want, you strive. You'll get it, and you'll win." Quincy understood the relationship between working hard and getting better grades, and he viewed his education as a battle within *himself* to strive in order to succeed. He did not associate his grades with his teachers or with the level of difficulty of the work, but rather, took personal responsibility for his learning and success.

Several other self-directed students described positive relationships with an individual outside of their families who had become a mentor to them. Kenny described being sent to a sleep away camp as a teen and meeting a youth coordinator who became "like a brother" to him, stating, "I'm so thankful to God to have...a special person like that in my life... he's a great man." Kenny also described himself as very self-directed in his approach to education and understood success in school as dependent on the student, on "being proactive" because "in the end of the day, it's your self-motivation." He explained his views on students who use excuses to justify their behavior: "When you're in college, you can't have that mindset...the slightest thing to the biggest thing could go wrong and you're always going to have an excuse." He continued, "After a while, nobody wants to hear...'I had to do this' and 'I had to do that' and it's like 'No...you have to do *this*. If you want this, you have to do this, *not that*'... I see that *I* have to do it, and that's my personal responsibility." Kenny described active engagement in the learning environment as the student's responsibility; he understood education as not dependent on any external forces, but rather, as involving a student with a personal choice to complete the required work. Another student, Margaret, was similarly influenced by a staff member at her group home who became like a family member to her. While Margaret described this relationship as an important source of support, however, she also had a strong sense of independence in her views of education. She stated that she did not stay in school merely because her role model encouraged her to do so, explaining, "[It's] just my ambition and my drive. That's what helps me stay, because...I'm not going to stay just because [she] wants me to stay. I'm going to stay because *I want to stay*." Like other students who described similar relationships, Margaret described herself as self-directed and self-motivated in her approach to education.

Descriptions of positive self-direction and self-motivation in school were also present in interviews with students who stated that they wanted to be role models to younger family members in their lives. Oliver described his father as extremely abusive and his mother as a drug addict, but while he did not have a parental role model in his life, he was determined to be that role model to his siblings. He explained that his siblings look "at me as an amazing role model, and that's my goal" because "we lived a hard enough life as it is, and I just don't want it to continue. I want... them to have a childhood...It is what you make it...that's how I see things." He also stated that he is attending college for himself, is not dependent on the teacher to be motivated to attend, and takes personal responsibility for failing the placement exam: "I didn't get the score I needed to get because I just wasn't focused enough in high school." Oliver lacked external motivation to attend college, but he was self-motivated and self-

directed to complete his developmental courses. Similarly, Nicole described how wanting “to be a good role model” to her daughter caused her to take education “much more seriously” and explained, “I wanted more for myself and my child...I wanted to teach her the right ways and the only ways to instill that in her is to let her know, no matter what, I still accomplished this, and...education was important.” Nicole also described being self-directed and independent in her approach to education, and her level of enjoyment in her class and her motivation to excel was also not dependent on external forces. She stated that while some people in the class were discouraged by the teachers, she was still “getting a lot from [them]” because she stated, “I guess it all depends on you.” Nicole understood education as a means of self-improvement and was internally motivated in her approach to educational tasks. In addition, Steve described, “Well, you know how they say practice what you preach, basically. I’m always telling my kids how they have to study and how school is so important and how it’s beneficial for your future.” His self-direction and love of learning was also evident in his description of his favorite part of college: “Learning of course...Expanding your mind...I love to learn.” Steve discussed the importance he placed on being a role model, but he was also internally motivated to attend school and self-directed in his learning.

Students from this sample who provided descriptions of role model relationships in their lives often discussed their commitment to education, their discipline in their studies, and their determination to complete a degree. Interestingly, while these students described the role model relationship as influential to them, their approach to education was described as self-directed and self-motivated. Some research has described role models as social factors that encourage students to pursue higher education, but this research does not discuss students’ approach to their coursework after enrollment (Harris, 1998). Research in developmental education has also emphasized the need for teachers and successful students to act as role models to developmental students to serve as examples of success after students enter a program, but this literature does not discuss the value of role model relationships that developed prior to college enrollment (Colton et al., 1999; McClenney & Flores, 1998; Mellander & Robertson, 1992; Pierce, Harper, Hemby, Grubb, & Hull, 1993; Van, 1994). It is possible that students in this sample who described the importance of a role model relationship in their lives also developed a greater degree of self-awareness and a more positive self-concept partly as a result of that connection.

In contrast, students in this sample who did not discuss the presence of a role model relationship in their lives often took less responsibility for their actions and blamed external forces for their decision to attend college. Dean, for example, did not have anyone who supported or guided him, and he described moving back and forth between his parents’ homes multiple times, being placed in foster care, and experiencing his mother’s abuse. He also provided several confusing and somewhat contradictory explanations for his forced enrollment including his father’s medical insurance, owing his father money, his parole agreement, and court ordered counseling sessions that were not funded unless he was a student. In each of his explanations, he characterized the process of attending college as externally imposed on him as if he was not an active participant in the decision. Like Dean, Henry also did not have any role model who had supported him, describing his relationship with his father as a painful rejection that afforded him no guidance, and he also placed responsibility for his college enrollment on external forces. He stated that he did not feel college was the place for him, but his mother and brothers nagged him to the point where he felt forced to enroll. He explained, “Nobody can say in my house that I didn’t try...I said...if I don’t feel like it’s for me...Y’all can’t get mad at me.” He repeatedly stated that he did not intend to pursue a college education and that his peers are “surprised” that he enrolled because everyone knew he did not want to come. If it turned out that college

was not "for him," he could withdraw, and he stated that it would not matter to him because he never wanted to attend in the first place. In addition, Laura stated that she never felt supported by her mother or anyone else and described her college enrollment in terms of external forces that caused her to react. She claimed, "I didn't want to come to school, period" but enrolled in college "because my mother told me to...I didn't have a big choice." Laura understood her college enrollment as externally imposed on her, so she maintained that she was not interested in learning, did not intend to apply herself, and was indifferent about her academic success. Several other students who described negative family relationships and the lack of a role model in their lives also attributed their college enrollment to an uncontrollable reaction to external forces.

This pattern of external attribution was also evident in these students' descriptions of difficulties with self-direction and self-motivation within academic environments. Often, descriptions of their educational experiences focused on their need for external motivation, and they took less responsibility for their learning. For example, when Dean's English teacher was angry with him for instant messaging on the computer during his lecture, he blamed the teacher for placing him in front of a computer which made him uncontrollably react: "I'm in my natural surroundings of computers!" He also described needing external forces to guide him and tell him what to do in order for him to successfully complete academic tasks. Similarly, Fergie described not having a role model in her life and also expressed difficulties with being internally motivated in her approach to learning stating, "I'm not disciplined" and, "If you don't have that natural feeling to actually want to do it, and to know you just want to and have to...it's not strong enough for me...to feel free and safe that I'm going to actually make it through the semester. It's like an everyday...battle for me." Fergie was not naturally self-motivated in her academic endeavors, and without an external force to provide her with direction and motivation, she felt that educational success was a constant battle of resisting "laziness." Several other students who described having no role model relationships also stated that they did not do homework or put any extra effort into their classes. Throughout their descriptions, students without role model relationships were not active participants in their learning, but rather, were dependent on external forces to direct them.

In addition, students without role model relationships described their educational success as extremely dependent on teachers and unrelated to their own efforts or abilities. Henry, for example, blamed his teachers for failing to show effort to educate and motivate him so that he could succeed in college. In Henry's description, his success is the teacher's responsibility, and Henry's role is to be "a student telling him what he's doing wrong." The teacher is responsible for making Henry want to stay in the class, and he stated that teachers who fail to motivate him will "make [him] quit." He explained that his teacher needs "to put more effort to it. If he don't put no effort in it, that's when I'm not going to care no more...If I don't pass this test it's going to make me not come...I don't pass this test, you fail as a teacher to me.'" If Henry did not experience educational success, he viewed the failure as his teacher's and not his own, and that failure would "make" him withdraw from college. In addition, the teacher was responsible for directing him by telling him precisely where he made each and every mistake: "Don't ...make me figure what I'm doing wrong...You're my professor, tell me what I'm doing wrong." Henry needed his teachers to provide him with "the right answer," rather than being a self-directed learner or viewing skill improvement as a learning process that involved discovery and subjective inquiry. Henry also provided various external explanations for failing his placement exam including the time limit which "made [him] fail," the college confusing his score with another student's, and his professor whom he claimed was mad at him so he "just put [F] just to show me ...he's still the boss." Rachel similarly described that her passing grade on her recent midterm was completely unrelated to her ability: "Probably one of

those teachers was like, let me just give this child a break...Maybe one of them had a good day... I think that if I was to take that exam again, I'd probably fail." She continued, "Maybe that essay was easy. If they give me another essay on another topic, who is to say that my opinions...are as good?" She did not view this educational success as in any way related to her, but instead, as a result of external forces acting on her. These students described their successful learning, motivation, and educational outcomes as existing externally to themselves.

The ways in which students without role model relationships understood their educational environment as externally imposed on them indicates that they may suffer from learned helplessness. When individuals experience failure regardless of their effort, this trauma can have negative effects on their self-esteem, feelings of self-efficacy, and self-attitudes about their intellectual performance. As a result, these individuals believe that a given behavior will not produce an expected outcome, and thus they become passive; in other words, they learn to be helpless. These feelings of helplessness can have devastating effects on the motivation and self-direction of students in academic settings by causing the expectation of academic failure regardless of effort. Because of embedded feelings of powerlessness, students may lack self-direction in their approach to learning assignments, and school may become an institution of authority in which teachers dispense grades, regardless of student effort. Many of these students described histories of trauma and of personal and academic failures that may have negatively affected their feelings of controllability, thereby possibly causing learned helplessness. Through these experiences, some students may have been trained to lack trust, faith, or security in the fact that their efforts will produce desired outcomes. Some research has described learned helplessness as possible issue for developmental students often stating that because students expect to fail, there may be no incentive for them to make the effort (Simpson, Hynd, & Nist, 1997; Valeri-Gold et al., 1998; Van, 1994; Yaworski, Weber, & Ibrahim, 2000). If students expect to fail, they are therefore less likely to assist themselves academically, yet their lack of effort actually facilitates their failure, and this self-defeating behavior can cause them never to persist long enough to experience success.

Learned helplessness is generally associated with repeated experiences with failure and a consequent fear of failure in future educational endeavors. Interestingly, however, most of the students in this cohort described test anxiety, doubts about their writing ability, and fear of failing in college, but only some of those students' descriptions indicated an external locus of control. These findings indicate that a role model relationship may play some part in preventing an external locus of control even if the causes of learned helplessness are present. Research in risk and resilience has indicated that as the number of risks increase, so do the effects, with the greatest risk existing when the economic and noneconomic environments are both impoverished (Garbarino & Ganzel, 2000). While most students in this sample endured impoverished economic environments, students who described greater self-direction and self-motivation in their approach to learning reported the experience of richer noneconomic environments through a role model relationship. It is possible that the experience of a role model relationship provided some students with the types of interactions that facilitated their feelings of security so that they developed a more positive self-concept.

Implications

This study represents an important first step in developing a deeper understanding of educational experiences that could allow for the future design of comprehensive needs-based support for this student population. This level of support requires a collaborative effort among counselors, advisors, and mentors to provide adequate intervention to facilitate the educational success of developmental students. Many students who lack role models in their lives require assistance in the development of

self-confidence, self-direction, and self-efficacy that only *regular* contact with a counselor can provide. Counselors should provide both academic intervention and affective assistance, intervening in the management of students' academic affairs as well as social, mental, and emotional challenges based students' individual needs and objectives. Faculty advisors should also meet with students regularly, explaining the rules and regulations of the college and assisting students in making appropriate decisions about courses and employment based on their educational, occupational, and personal goals. Additionally, the college should attempt to connect students with peer mentors who have successfully completed developmental education courses. Relationships with peers who have had experiences that are similar to the developmental students and have managed to overcome challenges in situational and affective areas could lead to increased motivation and improved social integration. Because developmental students often lack exposure to individuals in their communities who are working in their fields of interest, colleges should also attempt to provide mentors that are related to the career goals of students through the use of guest speakers and internship opportunities. Providing students with opportunities to become mentors in their communities could also allow students to experience the value of being a role model to others, leading to increased self-direction.

The ways in which faculty interact with students could also influence self-direction and challenges associated with an external locus of control and learned helplessness. Some research has emphasized that when teachers show frustration about students' lack of effort, they tend to exacerbate learned helplessness by sending students negative messages about their chances of success (Coley & Hoffman, 1990; Wachholz & Etheridge, 1996). Instead, teachers should model how to learn through adapting the circumstances, demonstrate that failure is surmountable through redirection and correction, expect students to succeed, and reinforce students' efforts until they successfully shift to an internal locus of control. Response journals in which students reflect on their learning and on methods of increasing success also provide valuable opportunities for teachers to strengthen individual relationships and encourage students to view themselves as active learners. Course materials should also include examples of successful individuals who were motivated, responsible, and took the initiative to actively seek outside supports to assist in the achievement of their goals. Students, with the support of a trusted teacher who encourages them and demonstrates the relationship between effort and results, can begin to recognize that they are in control of their educational success and that peer and faculty can support them in reaching their goals. Through a variety of approaches, students who expressed an external locus of control may begin to *see themselves* as participants in their own education and realize that success is actually the fulfillment of *their own* purposes (Grow, 1991; Winograd & Niquette, 1988).

This study represents a necessary first step in providing a deeper understanding of the experiences of a cohort of developmental students with non-cognitive variables and can serve as a starting point for future research. While this study provides descriptions of students' experiences with non-cognitive variables, any influence of these variables on educational retention, success, and persistence is not known. Currently, a follow-up study is being conducted to explore the educational outcomes of this cohort of students and the extent to which these variables influenced their success. Future research could also conduct affective assessments of students through similar interviews and then track student progress in order to explore possible influences of these variables. Also, while the lack of role models is discussed in the literature as a possible access barrier to higher education, the influence of having or being a role model on students' engagement in the educational experience after enrollment is not often discussed (Beder, 1991; Bolge, 1994). Future research could focus on the ways in which students understand the various types of role model relationships to provide information about

the most effective methods of incorporating mentoring and advising components into a developmental program.

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