Examining associations among achievement motivation, locus of control, academic stress, and life satisfaction: A comparison of U.S. and international undergraduate students

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A B S T R A C T

This study compared measures of achievement motivation, life satisfaction, academic stress, and locus of control across 307 U.S. and international undergraduate students. Descriptive statistics and MANOVA were used to analyze the variables. A hierarchical multiple regression was employed to determine the extent to which locus of control, academic stress, and life satisfaction predicted achievement motivation. The results indicated a statistically significant difference between U.S. and international students as related to achievement motivation. Further analysis revealed significant relationships among predictor and criterion variables. Locus of control, academic stress, and life satisfaction significantly explained 18% of the variance in achievement motivation. However, a comparison of model fit between U.S. and international students revealed no statistically significant differences.

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1. Introduction

The world has become a more globalized environment as a result of cutting-edge technology, mass media, social movements, economic trade, and more expedient forms of transportation. These innovations have had a profound effect on the internationalization of education, making it easier for students to apply to different universities and move across states and countries for their education, thus establishing a new life for themselves during and after their educational careers. Consequently, this process has resulted in the highest number of students – almost 4.5 million – enrolling in postsecondary institutions outside their country of citizenship worldwide (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013).

International students in higher education are one of the fastest growing populations in the United States (Institute of International Education [IIE], 2015). Moving to another country is more than studying for international students; adapting to a new environment and culture is stressful, and can seriously affect a student's life satisfaction and motivation to achieve. Martinez (2001) found that high levels of motivation to achieve and satisfaction with life increase student retention rates. However, the majority of literature focusing on the acculturation process (Chavajay & Skowronek, 2008; Desa, Yusoooff, & Abd Kadir, 2012; Smith & Khawaja, 2011) neglects how these students motivate themselves to achieve and how their satisfaction of life, academic stress, and sense of control of their environment affects their level of achievement motivation.

Achievement motivation was theorized by McClelland (1961) as identifying three distinct needs: (1) a need for achievement, (2) a need for affiliation, and (3) a need for power. These distinct needs are learned, acquired over time, and shaped by one's own life experiences. Educational researchers have demonstrated achievement motivation to be a strong predictor of success, perceived accomplishment, and academic ability (Liao, Ferdenzi, & Edlin, 2012; Story, Hart, Stasson, & Mahoney, 2009). In addition, researchers have found achievement motivation to be significantly correlated with occupational choice, subjective well-being, college satisfaction, neuroticism, life goals, locus of control, and learning strategies (Ahmad & Rana, 2012; Bakhtiavand, Ahmadian, Delrooz, & Farahani, 2011; Rosa & Bernardo, 2013; Guns, Richardson, & Watt, 2012; Li, Lan, & Ju, 2015). In this respect, knowing the predictors and factors of achievement motivation holds value since achievement motivation is directly related to student retention and success (Martinez, 2001).

There are different factors affecting both international and U.S. college students' achievement, academic stress, and life satisfaction. For example, Chen (1999) stated that international college students studying in North America endure substantial psychological stress in their daily lives. He described academic stress as one of the common stressors experienced among international students. There are many factors
2.2.3. Academic stress

The Student Life Style Inventory-Revised (SSI-R; Gadzella & Masten, 2005) was used to measure academic stress. The SSI-R is a self-report measure that estimates academic stress of college level students with 53 items organized into nine factors. The SSI-R uses a 5-point Likert-type response format with values ranging from 1 (Never) to 5 (Most of the Time). The SSI-R includes items such as “I have experienced frustrations due to delays in reaching my goal” and “I have experienced both positive and negative alternatives.” Authors reported strong Cronbach’s alpha values. The total reliability of instrument was 0.92. The correlations (test-retest) between each category ranged from 0.46 to 0.76. The reliability of subscales ranged from 0.61 on the self-imposed subscale to 0.86 on the changes subscale.

2.2.4. Life satisfaction

We used the 5-item Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), which assesses how satisfied an individual is with his/her life in terms of well-being. The scale is a self-report questionnaire that estimates perceived level of life satisfaction across five items using a 7-point Likert-type response format with values ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 7 (Strongly Agree). Results of the five items are summed to produce an overall score with high scores indicating high satisfaction with life and low scores indicating low satisfaction with life. The 5-item scale includes items such as “In most ways my life is close to my ideal” and “I am satisfied with life.” The SWLS has been translated into 32 different languages and is well-suited for use with individuals from different cultural backgrounds (Satisfaction with Life Scale, 2014). The internal consistency for this scale was found to be 0.84 (Diener et al., 1985).

3. Results

3.1. Preliminary analyses

First, descriptive statistics and alpha coefficients were computed for each instrument used in the study (see Table 1). Next, the assumptions of MANOVA and multiple linear regression models were tested. To assess the assumption of normality, box plots were inspected and a Shapiro-Wilk goodness-of-fit test was computed and its results interpreted. Box plot analyses and the Shapiro-Wilk test of normality (W > 0.01) indicated the data to be normally distributed for all measures.
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