

Chapter 6

Mean Level Changes in College Students' Academic Motivation and Engagement

ABSTRACT

The complex associations and the stability of different motivational constructs lead to the next step of exploration of the stability of motivation at the group and gender levels. In other words, the stability of the means of motivation and engagement for the whole group, and for boys and girls separately in the final two years of college, are investigated in this chapter. Different students experienced different levels of motivational cognitions and behaviors. Although boys and girls were similar on many aspects, boys reported higher levels of disengagement, while girls reported higher levels of anxiety.

INTRODUCTION

The two years leading up to college graduation are important for students because their results at this time open up different academic and career pathways. High levels of motivation towards learning at school have been shown to be positively associated with school results (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002; Martin, 2007; McInerney & Van Etten, 2004; Pintrich, 2003). In the last chapter, it was shown how the position of individual students on the subscales shifted throughout the college years. In this chapter, group 'stability', i.e., the stability of the means of motivation and engagement for the whole group, and for boys and girls separately in the final two years of college is investigated.

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In the college years, the academic demands are more rigorous than in earlier high school years. Students differ in their intellectual and emotional capacity to manage these demands. Earlier Australian studies have reported that almost half of Year 11 and 12 students experienced 'at risk' levels of psychological distress during their highly competitive final years (Hodge, McCormick, & Elliott, 1997; Smith & Sinclair, 2000). For students facing an examination, which is worth a large percentage of total assessment, the last few months before the examination have been shown to be most demanding. In a study of New South Wales college students, negative affective responses, such as, anxiety and depression increased significantly, between the end of Term 1 and the Trial Exams in Year 12 students (Smith, Sinclair, & Chapman, 2002).

Other factors might decrease or increase student motivation in the college years. College students tend to take up part-time jobs for longer hours and they are also at an age when social relationships are important for them. Friends begin to be their primary source of social support and contribute in important ways to their self-concept and well-being (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). In an educational system where a final examination is the major part of assessment, such factors are likely to have most impact on their performance in the second half of the final year (Smith et al., 2002). In the ACT, however, where assessment is spread across the final two years, more gradual changes in motivation might be distributed across these years.

Most studies examining academic motivation and engagement in Australian students have targeted elementary, middle or high school students (Martin, 2003; Plenty & Heubeck, 2011, 2013; Watt, 2004;), whereas only a few have targeted college students (Martin, 2007; Smith, 2004;). Developmental trends in cognitive and behavioral aspects of adaptive motivation, found in expectancy-value and achievement goal research (Fredricks & Eccles, 2002; Jacobs et al., 2002), as explained in chapter 2, showed that adaptive motivation decreased over time across grades 1 through 12. Longitudinal research on motivation and engagement has revealed that students' perceptions of their competence and their value on school work generally decline in grades 11 and 12. This has been associated with declining school achievement (Jacobs et al. 2002; Watt, 2004). Considering that the assessment is spread across the final two years in the ACT and the academic pressures, especially when the final grade in Year 12 includes scores obtained in both Years 11 and 12, it was expected that the levels of motivation and engagement might change across the years.

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