

The importance of directly asking students their reasons for attending higher education

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Few studies have directly asked undergraduate students their reasons for coming to institutions for higher learning and, instead, have been developed based on theoretical rationale. We asked undergraduate students to list all of their reasons for attending university and to indicate those most important. Overall, students reported more than five and most listed both internal and external reasons. Highly endorsed internal reasons included self-improvement, achieving life goals, whereas highly endorsed external reasons pertained to career and family. Upper-year students listed more reasons for attending and tended to list reasons pertaining to self-improvement/satisfaction and societal contributions. Many first year students attended to prove to others they could earn a degree. Although many of the items students endorsed here concurred with other popular scales' items, some of the central listed items did not, with many items on some scales not even being mentioned by our sample. The complexity of reasons our students listed may help to explain outcomes such as GPA, retention and satisfaction.

Introduction

Kennett and Reed (2009) observed that students deciding not to return to university in their second year, following a mandatory university preparation course, had either impoverished everyday life coping skills or academic resourcefulness skills or both, suggesting, skill-wise, they remained disadvantaged and at risk for academic failure despite the preparation course's focus. These authors suggest that subsequent research needs to explore the factors prohibiting educators from reaching these students and that investigating the reasons why students attend post-secondary institutions may be a good place to start. They propose that students attending university for predominantly extrinsic reasons (e.g., to please others and as a means to an end) are going to be more difficult to help in comparison to students attending for more intrinsic reasons (e.g., for self-growth and the challenge), especially if they view a required preparation course as unnecessary. The major goal of the current investigation was to understand the central internal and external reasons of why students attend higher education, as well as to determine whether these reasons for attending differ for upper year level and first year students.

Even though there has been a lot of research on the reasons for why students drop out of university (cf. Tinto, 1998) and reasons for choosing particular professions (e.g., Watt & Richardson, 2008), surprisingly, there has been limited research directly asking students why they come to institutions of higher learning in the first place; a quandary also raised by Phinney, Dennis & Osorio (2006). Instead, such scales have been developed on the basis of theoretical consideration (e.g., Côté & Levine, 1997), and/or

have focused on academic motivation and why students engage in specific academic tasks (e.g., Vallerand, Pelletier, Blais Brière, Senècal & Vallières, 1992), or it is unclear of a scale's origins (e.g., Bui, 2002). Investigations that examine students reasons for attending have predominantly focused on the association of reasons with ethnic minority differences, parents' educational experience or socioeconomic status level (e.g., Bui, 2002; Phinney, et al., 2006), and not on retention, academic goals and academic self-management habits, which also needs to be addressed (Kennett and Reed, 2009). Bui (2002), for example, compared three groups of students: first generation, both parents have some college but no degrees, and both parents have at least a bachelor's degree. The focus of this study was to determine the differences between groups in terms demographics, reasons for attending university and first-year experiences. He found first generation students, in comparison to the other two groups, came from families having a lower socioeconomic status and from homes where the language spoken was mostly other than English, and reported lower Standardised Achievement Test scores. First generation students also felt less prepared for university and more afraid of failing. They knew less about the university's social environment and put more time into studying to avoid failure than the other groups. Regarding reasons for pursuing a higher education, first generation students endorsed more wanting to gain respect/status, to bring honour to the family and to move out of the parents' home in comparison to students whose parents had at least some exposure to college/university.

One shortcoming with Bui's (2002) investigation is that no mention is made of the source, development and psychometric properties for the inventory used to assess students' reasons for pursuing higher education. Although the 16-item scale used by Bui (2002) and other inventories (e.g., Vallerand et al., 1992) tap reasons one might intuitively suspect, it is important for us to learn from the students themselves their reasons for attending higher education, to what extent these reasons are central to them, whether these reasons differ depending on students' year of study and, in the end, to compare these reasons with those incorporated in other popular scales. This was the goal of the current investigation.

Method

Participants

Participants were 69 first year and 63 upper year undergraduate students attending a multicultural/urban university in Toronto, Ontario, Canada. Most of the sample was comprised of females (87%), with ages ranging from 17 to 48 years and on average being 20.86 years ($SD = 4.66$). Ethnic/cultural background of these students was widely represented and not dominated by any one particular group, including Canadian, American, Asian, Cuban, Trinidadian, Italian and Aboriginal, to name a few. Of the 63 upper year students, 38%, 38% and 24% were in their second, third or fourth year of studies, respectively. Although student majors were not tracked, the classes that were approached for participation included students in business, community service (i.e., social work, youth worker), education, science and social science.

Measure

The *Inquiry about Reasons for Attending University* provided the following overview and instructions to students:

Most students attend university for a wide variety of reasons (and not just one). Reasons generally involve a blend of both intrinsic factors (e.g., to foster self-growth, to prove I have the ability) and extrinsic factors (e.g., to get a higher paying job, to make my parents proud of me). In this inquiry, we would like to know all of your reasons for pursuing a post-secondary degree. Once you are finished with your list, go back and circle the items that are most central for you being here.

On this sheet, they were also asked for information about their age, year-level, gender, and ethnic/cultural background.

Procedure

After approval from the University's Research Ethics Committee, the third author attended several classes, requesting students' involvement in the study during the first term of the academic year. No incentives were offered for participating. Once responses were collected, items were categorised either as internally-based ($N = 11$) or as externally-based ($N = 11$) reasons. Internally-based categories represented reasons that involved learning and wanting to grow as a person, whereas externally-based categories represented reasons that involved a means to an end or fulfilling other people's needs/wishes (e.g., obtaining a job, pleasing parents).

Results

Table 1 provides the internally and externally based categorical reasons for attending higher education, and its endorsement by first and upper year students, separately. Given certain categories represented a broadly based set of reasons (e.g., the career category included reasons such as wanting a good job, a high paying job, more advanced career opportunities), for some students two or more items they listed represented the same category. Hence, on average, students listed slightly more items ($M = 5.38$, $SD = 2.13$) than that counted by the number of categorical based reasons they satisfied. The average number of categories endorsed by students was 4.55 ($SD = 1.65$). The externally-based categories on average were significantly more highly endorsed ($M = 2.50$, $SD = 1.01$) than internally-based categories ($M = 2.04$, $SD = 1.23$) by students, $t(134) = 3.50$, $p < .001$.

Correlation analyses revealed that it was significantly more likely for upper year students to be older ($r = .32$) and list more reasons for attending university ($r = .18$) than first year students. Based on our categorisation of the internal and external based reasons, a student endorsing more internally-based categories was unrelated to the number of externally-based ones he/she satisfied ($r = .08$), and first and upper year students were observed to fulfill a similar number of internally ($r = .15$) and externally

($r = .02$) based categories, albeit there was a slight tendency for upper year students to have a higher internally-based score ($p = .09$).

Table 1: Categories of the internal and external reasons for attending university, percentage of first (N = 69) and upper (N = 63) year students endorsing them in general and as a central reason

Category	% In general			% Central		
	First	Upper	P**	First	Upper	P**
Internal reasons						
Self-improvement	49.28	57.14	.05	20.29	36.51	
Prove to self	11.59	12.70		8.70	4.76	
Contribute/give back to society	1.45	14.29	.005	1.45	6.35	
For the challenge	24.64	15.87		13.04	6.35	
Major goal/dream	50.72	44.44		28.99	23.81	
Respect	13.04	9.52		10.14	3.17	
Self-satisfaction/fulfilment	5.80	15.87	.06	1.45	11.11	.02
Higher ed. has intrinsic value	2.90	1.59		1.59	0.00	
Keep busy	7.25	14.29		1.45	3.17	
Like learning	15.94	26.98		4.35	11.11	
Compatible program interests	4.35	11.11		1.45	1.59	
External reasons						
To prove to others	14.49	3.17	.02	10.14	1.59	.04
Career/money	84.06	95.24	.04	62.32	60.32	
Family expectations/reasons	76.81	68.25		28.99	28.57	
Friends going	7.25	12.70		0.00	3.17	
To meet people	23.19	12.70		2.90	1.59	
Societal expectations	13.04	26.98	.05	4.35	4.76	
Persuasion from teachers/others	1.45	1.59		0.00	0.00	
Break cycle	10.14	3.17		4.35	0.00	
Student services	2.90	0.00		0.00	0.00	
Location	8.70	6.34		6.34	0.00	
Other external reasons*	5.80	22.22	.007	2.90	7.94	

*other external reasons included: wanting to leave home or neighbourhood, to take advantage of a scholarship, to play in varsity sports, had the financial means.

**significant p values reflecting differences between first and upper year students

As shown in Table 1, for both first and upper year students, their predominant and central reasons for attending university were for self-improvement, to achieve the goal of attaining a degree, to secure a well paying job, and because of family expectations. A significantly higher percentage of upper year than first year students listed self-improvement, contribute to society, self-satisfaction/fulfilment, career/money, societal expectations and other external reasons such as to play in varsity sports. In contrast, more first year students wanted to prove to others that they had what it takes to attend university and/or earn a degree.

For each student, an internal/external ratio score was calculated, whereby the number of internal categories endorsed, plus one was divided by the number of external

categories endorsed, plus one. One was added to the numerator and denominator of the ratio because a few students did not list any internal ($N = 7$ students) or external reasons ($N = 1$ student), giving them a ratio score of zero or undefined. A ratio score of one would mean that there were equal numbers of internal vs. external reasons. A ratio score of less than one would indicate fewer internal reasons, whereas a score greater than one indicates more internal reasons. The mean ratio score was .95 ($SD = .49$) and ranged from .25 to 3. Students having a higher internal ratio score were more likely to be older ($r = .27$) and, as expected, more inclined to list each of the reasons representing the internally-based categories (with r values ranging from .17 to .31). Interestingly, a higher internal ratio score was unrelated to being a first versus upper year student, and with the exception of career, family, friends going and societal expectations, where the relationships were negative (r s = -.22, -.33, -.22, and -.25, respectively), the remaining externally based categories were unrelated with this score. Thus, for some students, their reasons for attending were predominantly internally-based.

Examining the top four listed reasons for attending university (i.e., self-improvement, goal, career and family) and its relationship with the other listed ones and age, we observed that students endorsing self-improvement as a reason were more likely to be older ($r = .21$) and less likely to list friends were going to university ($r = -.20$). Students indicating that it was their goal/dream/passion to attend university were also more likely to list wanting the experience/challenge ($r = .22$) and less inclined to list wanting to contribute to society ($r = -.17$) and to break the cycle and be the first in the family to attend ($r = -.19$). Students listing career/money as a reason were more likely to list societal expectation ($r = .17$) and less likely to list persuasion from teacher and others ($r = -.36$), student services ($r = -.36$) and location ($r = -.18$) as reasons for attending. Attending for family reasons was associated with being younger ($r = -.40$), and listing friends were going ($r = .20$) and not listing to contribute to society ($r = -.24$).

Only 52.27% of the entire sample rated both internally and externally based reasons as being central (i.e., at least one item in each category). Also, 64.40% of them rated at least one internal category as central and 76.52% of them rated at least one external category as central for them being here. Table 2 shows the percentage of students indicating the number of internal and external categories being central for them attending higher education.

Table 2: Percentage of students endorsing the number of internal and external categories as central reasons for attending university

Number of categories selected as central	% Internal	% External
0	35.60	23.48
1	38.64	45.45
2	18.94	25.76
3	4.55	3.03
4	1.52	2.27
5	0.76	0.00

Discussion

This investigation directly asked students their reasons for attending university. Despite the uncertainty regarding the development and psychometric properties of the 16-item scale used by Bui (2002), all of the items of this scale were listed by our sample of students. And similar to our observation, Bui's groups highly rated career and family as reasons for attending university. One shortcoming of Bui's 16-item scale, though, is its strong representation of students' external reasons for attending. In fact, of the 16 items, only five of them reflect internally based reasons for attending higher education. In our study, many students had a balance of both internal and external reasons for attending, and a lot of them listed wanting the challenge and satisfying the dream of a higher education, items not tapped by the scale used by Bui (2002). Also items not represented by Bui's 16-item inventory are items reflecting the need to prove to self that 'I can do it', self-satisfaction/fulfilment and wanting to contribute to society/make a difference. Hence, we recommend that subsequent investigations exploring the reasons why young people decide to attend post-secondary institutions have a better balance of internally-based (to grow as a person and to learn) and externally-based (as a means to an end and to fulfil other people's needs and wishes) items as depicted in Table 1.

Although Bui's scale focuses specifically on students' reasons for attending university, the *Academic Motivation Scale* (AMS) by Vallerand et al. (1992) has been widely used to understand students' motives while attending to their studies (e.g., Henderson-King & Smith, 2006; Pisarik, 2009). The development of this 28-item scale was based solely on the theoretical perspectives that had been proposed at the time. Namely, the scale addresses the dimensions of intrinsic motivation (i.e., to know, to accomplish and to experience stimulation), extrinsic motivation (i.e., identified – e.g., career of choice, introjected – e.g., to prove to self/feel important and external regulation – e.g., to find a high paying job) and amotivation. Given the instructions of the AMS to students, it might be considered by some as reflecting the reasons why students attend university in the first place. However, fifteen of the AMS' 28-items were not even mentioned by our students, and reflected the classes of intrinsic motives (e.g., "For the pleasure I experience when I discover new things never seen before", "For the pleasure I experience while surpassing myself in my studies", "For the intense feelings I experience when I am communicating my own ideas to others") and amotivation (e.g., "Honestly, I don't know; I really feel that I am wasting my time"). Reasons pertaining to family, friends, meeting people, breaking the cycle, proving to others and contributing/giving back to society that were reasons spontaneously listed by our sample are not included in the AMS. In short, generating reasons for attending university based on theoretical perspectives may not tap what students themselves are thinking when asked to freely list the reasons that brought them here, as our study did. As well, it is possible that reasons for attending have shifted since 1992, because of the social and economic environment changes that have taken place.

As noted earlier, Phinney et al. (2006) discuss the paucity of research on why young people attend university, and reason that this question is more likely to have more varied and complex answers among ethnic minorities. In order to investigate this claim,

they revised Côté and Levine's (1997) theoretically based scale, Students Motivation for Attending University, based on their focus group data with students from Asian, Latino and African American backgrounds. Transcription of the groups' discussions revealed three types of reasons not included in the original version of the scale: helping family, encouragement from others and proving to others they had what it takes to succeed; items also noted by our participants. Moreover, similar to Academic Motivation Scale by Vallerand et al. (1992), the amotivation items in the revised Côté and Levine's scale (e.g., I often ask why I'm in university, I don't get anything out of my courses) were not spontaneously listed by our sample of students, and perhaps are items reflecting aspects of the university experience, rather than reasons for attending. Additional items also not included in this revised scale but were listed by our sample were breaking the cycle, meeting people, proving to self and wanting the challenge.

Interesting is the finding, in our study, that first year students, in comparison to upper year students, listed significantly more often and as a central reason to prove to others that they had what it takes to attend university and attain a degree. Given some upper year students have likely proven their ability to others via their academic performance, this reason is not going to be that important to them. Instead, we see their reasons to be more focused on self-improvement and contributing back to society. Although only approaching significance, they were more likely to list that they enjoyed learning as a reason, too.

Nevertheless, regardless of age or year level, there were a good number of students who did not view many of the internal items on their list as being the most central reasons for attending university. Rather, a variety of external ones were selected instead. Although it was not the goal of the current investigation to examine to what extent reasons for attending university predict the types of goals students set, grades and retention, this is a necessary next step for investigators to take. Several decades of research has been spent, for example, linking the students' goal orientations with their learning behaviour and grades (e.g., Cury, Elliot, Da Fonseca, & Moller, 2006; Deci & Ryan; 2000; Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Elliot & Harackiewicz, 1996; Murayma & Elliot, 2009; Phan, 2009). In our study, students listing that it was their goal/dream/passion to attend university were also more likely to list wanting to be challenged. They may be the students having the more mastery goal orientation approach to learning. Mastery goal oriented students are interested in acquiring new skills even in the face of failure (Dweck, 1999). Students attending for more external reasons and particularly to prove to other people that they are capable may be setting higher performance-approach goals whereby they are striving to demonstrate normatively high ability. For other students in our study, a central reason for attending university was to please their family. Fear of disappointing them with poor grades may promote performance-avoidant goals, whereby they become more concerned with hiding their incompetency. This type of goal focus has been consistently related to negative learning behaviours and outcomes (e.g., Cury et al., 2006). Although this is all speculative, indeed, it is timely for researchers to examine the role reasons for attending university play in shaping students' goals, behaviour and outcomes.

Other studies show that academic resourcefulness is a direct predictor of grades (Kennett, Young & Catanzaro, 2009; Kennett & Keefer, 2006) and retention (Kennett, 1994; Kennett & Reed, 2009). Academically resourceful students delay immediate gratification, use problem solving strategies and other self-regulatory strategies to manage their time and deal with stress. Direct predictors of this skill set include possessing a large general repertoire of learned resourcefulness skills and academic self-efficacy (e.g., Kennett & Keefer, 2006). The type of reasons why students are attending university may also be a unique contributor, and warrants further investigation.

One limitation of this preliminary investigation is the small representation of male students. Ethics allowed us to give the survey to students and for them to return it to us in an anonymous manner, thus protecting their identity. Therefore, we could not target particular students failing to return the survey despite their initial interests. In the end, many more female than male students chose to participate. Comparisons of the males to females, however, reveal no significant differences in age, the number of reasons listed, the number of internal and external categories they satisfied or the internal/external ratio scores, suggesting that they attend for similar reasons.

Even though our sample came from a large multicultural university and was asked to give their ethnic background, it was not possible to determine if the types of reasons listed by these students varied based upon their ethnic group and is another limitation of the study. For some cases, it was unclear whether one's stated ethnic background reflected one's actual birth country versus ancestry. Thus, it would be fruitful for subsequent investigations to ask students to select from a specific list of categories the ethnic group they most identify with, as well as to indicate whether they are first generation immigrants, international students or long standing citizens of the country. The types of reasons students provide for why they attend university may be strongly associated with their citizenship status and/or the ethnic group they most identify with.

Noted in the introduction, Kennett and Reed (2009) asked why are the most skill deficit students the most difficult to reach, with many of them eventually dropping out of institutions of higher learning, even when programs are in place to help them? They posit that students' reasons for attending university are an important part of that answer. Observing that many students in our study gave predominantly external reasons for attending university highlights the importance of this suggestion.

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