Guide to Improving Scholastic Motivation

STUDENT'S GUIDE TO EFFECTIVE STUDY #8

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Psychologists have long recognized the relationship between motivation and achievement. In fact, the motivation factor is considered to be one of the most important determinants of success or failure in any area of human endeavor. Two examples are given below to illustrate this fact. Both are actual cases taken from real life. You can undoubtedly think of many other examples from your own experiences.

Example #1: Joe and Bill were high school football players, who both wanted to play college ball and then go into pro ball. Joe’s prospects seemed very good. He had the size, the speed, and the strength; the natural ability of a great athlete. He was all-state during his senior year and received a scholarship to a large university. Bill was rather small for a football player, had only average speed, and was not particularly gifted as an athlete. Nevertheless, he did earn a scholarship to a small college. Joe soon discovered that his natural athletic ability was not enough to guarantee his success in college football, and he was unwilling to make the necessary sacrifices of time and effort to improve his skills. Consequently, he barely made the traveling squad and, of course, he received no professional offers. Being more highly motivated, Bill did pay the price of success. He worked hard to improve his skills every day during his four college years and became a starter during his junior year. Later, he became a defensive star in the National Football League.

Example #2: Several years ago, two college freshmen came to the counseling office for help in planning their academic programs. Both Edward and Jim said they hoped to become dentists. The prospects for Edward seemed fairly good. Test scores indicated he had both the academic ability and the specific aptitudes necessary for dentistry. Jim’s prospects seemed rather poor by comparison. In fact, his test scores indicated only average ability for college work. One thing the tests did not reveal, however, was each student’s level of motivation. Edward proved to be more interested in “fun and games” than he was in achieving his stated vocational objective. After making two C’s, two D’s and an F his first semester, he decided to drop out of college and take a job with his uncle. By contrast, Jim recognized that he would need to work very hard so he studied diligently throughout his college years, graduated with a “B” average, and was immediately admitted to dental school.
You should realize, of course, that motivation alone will not assure your success in everything that you undertake. That obviously is not the case, for there must be a minimum level of ability for you to build upon. If you do possess a reasonable amount of the required ability, your odds for success will be greatly enhanced by also being highly motivated. Conversely, if you have a great deal of ability but are poorly motivated, the likelihood is very high that you will fail to achieve your goals.

Approximately 60% of the nation's college freshman fail to graduate in the prescribed time. Furthermore, the annual freshman to sophomore attrition rate is almost 40%. Both figures have remained fairly constant since the end of World War II. The primary reason for this high attrition rate is not inadequate finance, poor health, or lack of ability. These factors, as well as others, do influence the college attrition rate. However, most educational researchers and college administrators agree that the major reason is insufficient motivation.

It seems appropriate at this point for you to pause and ask yourself a very important question. "Am I sufficiently motivated to accept the challenge of college study?" Did you hesitate before answering? Why? If you're like most young people, you are finding it rather difficult to crystallize your thinking about your level of scholastic motivation. Perhaps the following discussion will help.

FIRST, what are your reasons for going to college? Is it primarily because your parents want you to go? Is it because your friends are going to college and you don't want to be left behind? Is it to avoid getting a job and going to work? Are you going for the social activities? For sports? Be honest with yourself! You have probably been asked this question before and, if you're like most young people, you probably said something about going to college to get an education. Is this really an answer or is it simply a convenient cliché? If you are unable to verbalize some very definite, realistic, and meaningful reasons for going to college, then your level of scholastic motivation is probably quite low.

SECOND, have you made some rather definite plans for the future? In other words, what do you plan to study in college and what do you plan to do after graduation? Research studies have shown that students with definite educational and occupational plans study more, get better grades, and persist longer in college than do students who are undecided about their future. If you are in the latter group, it would probably be well worth your time to see a counselor and explore your interests and aptitudes with him or her.

THIRD, are you sufficiently mature to handle college freedoms and responsibilities? Research shows that the grades one earns in college are directly related to one's degree of maturity. In other words, mature students usually earn good grades whereas immature students usually do not. One explanation for this may be that the mature
student is willing to sacrifice immediate needs and pleasures and work to achieve future goals and rewards. The immature student is more concerned with the satisfaction of his day-to-day needs and pleasures and is, therefore, unable to discipline himself to do the many hours of studying required of successful college students.

How about you? Are you ready to accept responsibility and exercise self-discipline over your personal, social, and academic activities? Although this is a difficult question, you must be completely honest with yourself as you seek the answer!

When you are given a written assignment, do you start working on the assignment immediately or do you procrastinate until shortly before it is due? The immature person will usually put his assignments off until the last moment. Mature students typically put their academic assignments ahead of their social pleasures. They have learned to put first things first and do the rest later. What about you?

Mature students have also learned to face reality. Immature people often rationalize their shortcomings by blaming others for their failures. For example, high school students will frequently use their teacher as a scapegoat and try to convince friends and parents that it really was the teacher’s fault that they made a low or failing grade. Some teachers are better than others, of course, and some teachers probably shouldn’t be teaching at all. However, grades are not “given” by teachers; they are “earned” by students. The immature student finds this difficult to accept. He would prefer placing the blame on someone else rather than accepting the responsibility himself. What about you?

Now, if you recognize that you are not truly ready to accept the freedoms and responsibilities of college, or if you are not ready to make some fairly definite educational and occupational plans, or if you are not able to verbalize meaningful reasons for going to college, then college may not be the best place for you—not now anyway. Many young people find it to their advantage to work for a year or two before going to college. This provides them with time to “find” themselves, to “explore” the world of work, to learn to “face” reality. In short, it gives them the chance to “mature” before tackling college. Others find it more beneficial to explore types of education other than the traditional four-year college program. There is a staggering demand for medical technologists, electronic technicians, office managers and many, many other occupations requiring only one or two years of training beyond high school graduation. Furthermore, people in these occupations often earn as much or more than does the typical college graduate.

By now you may be asking yourself this question: “If I’m going to college, what can I do to increase my scholastic motivation?” The following eight steps have proven to be of help to many other students asking the same question.
Step #1: Think through why you are going to college. Try to develop some realistic and meaningful reasons for spending four years of your life doing the things required to obtain a college degree. Your reasons must be strong enough to justify the long hours spent attending lectures, reading textbooks, writing reports, and taking tests. Also, your reasons must be personally valid because you are the one who must do the work. If you are really having difficulty justifying college attendance on academic grounds, you might want to read the book, “On Becoming An Educated Person,” written by Virginia Voeks for students like yourself.

Step #2: Think through what you would like to be doing after graduation and try to formulate some realistic and meaningful educational and occupational goals that are appropriate to your abilities and interests. Remember, having meaningful occupational plans will increase your interest in your courses, especially those that are related to your vocational preparation. A counselor is probably the best person to assist you in explaining the world of work and in evaluating your occupational interests and aptitudes.

Step #3: Try to correlate your course work with your occupational plans. In other words, don’t merely try to memorize facts but try to see the relationship between the material you are studying and your chosen occupation. You may often find it difficult to do this, but you should always try to relate your present academic work with your future occupational objectives. Remember, the more you know about your future occupation the easier it will be for you to “see” this relationship. Consequently, you should learn all that you can about your chosen vocation.

Step #4: Try to get to know others who share your educational vocational interests. For example, many professional organizations provide for the membership of students and encourage the establishment of local chapters so professionals and students can meet together informally. Attending these meetings and discussing your activities is an excellent way to clarify and reinforce your own objectives. If this is not possible, you can make an appointment and talk over your program with an instructor or counselor. The important thing is to find other people that you can talk to whenever you feel the need to discuss your plans.

Step #5: Try to get experience doing work that is closely related to your chosen occupation. For example, if you want to become a physician, try to get a part-time or summer job in a hospital. Such work experience will usually help to make your occupational goal more meaningful and will give you a better understanding of the training requirements, working conditions, and job duties associated with the occupation.

Step #6: Set short-term educational goals for yourself. At the beginning of each semester, determine what grade you wish to make in each course. Next, determine what grade you will need on the first test to insure meeting the goal you have set for
yourself. After you have taken your first test and receive the results, determine what grade you will need on your second exam. Do this for each course throughout the semester. You will find it really does help you to focus your study needs more sharply.

Step #7: Prepare a visual record of your progress in each course and display it in a prominent place. Many students do this by marking their predetermined grade on a graph, and then plotting the results for each test on this graph. Keeping such a visual record accomplishes three purposes: 1) it serves as a daily reminder of your academic progress, 2) it makes your study activities seem more purposeful, and 3) it identifies those courses in which you need to study harder.

Step #8: Make a sincere effort to improve your study efficiency. Research has demonstrated that students receiving study skills instruction have improved their grade-point averages by about one-half letter grade. Furthermore, students receiving study skills instruction almost always spend less time studying than do students having deficient study skills. Studying is like any other skill; it becomes easier as well as more satisfying when one knows the “tricks of the trade”. Fortunately, almost anyone can learn to study efficiently, all it takes is adequate time and effort devoted to practicing the proper study techniques. There are many how-to study programs — either teacher-taught courses or do-it-yourself guides—available for the student who sincerely wants to improve his study skills. Most students would find it very worthwhile to complete such a program.

It should be apparent by now that the key to improving your scholastic motivation lies in knowing what you want from college and why you want it. College graduation does offer many significant rewards, but you must decide if these rewards are worth the required investment of your time and effort.

Today, more than ever, the better paying, more prestigious jobs require college training. Jobs requiring advanced training—professional, managerial, and technical jobs — are growing at twice the rate of the labor force as a whole. The college graduate has a much better opportunity to do creative or managerial work than does the high school graduate. Better pay, greater security, higher prestige—these are three of the occupational rewards for completing college.

A college education also helps you to acquire five very important intellectual skills. As a direct outcome of his academic experiences, the college graduate will have mastered the skills required for locating, interpreting, evaluating, organizing, and communicating information on a given topic. Developing these five skills will sharpen your perceptions of your reactions in three ways. First, it will stimulate your interest in finding out the “why” and the “how” about new things. Second, it will develop your ability to quickly and logically analyze the ideas and motives of others. Third, it will develop your ability to effectively and convincingly express your own ideas and
beliefs. Consequently, the opportunity to develop these skills must be rated as another very good reason for going to college.

When they look back upon their college years, most alumni agree that the spiritual and intellectual benefits of a college education were of even greater importance than the occupational rewards. For many students, the stimulating intellectual environment of the college campus challenges them for the first time to deepen their self-understanding of cultures elsewhere in the world. These spiritual and emotional rewards of a college education are likely to prove even more crucial for a life full of rich meaning in the future than they have in the past.

These spiritual, intellectual and occupational rewards thus provide three meaningful reasons for obtaining a college education. Your level of scholastic motivation is directly related to your understanding and acceptance of these benefits. You should ponder each one seriously if you are ever tempted to drop out of college.