College Student Success Course Takers' Perceptions of College Student Effectiveness

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Abstract

College student success courses are designed to help students develop effective self-regulating learning (SRL) skills. Little research has examined students' perceptions of SRL at course end. The purpose of this study was to examine student perceptions of "what makes an effective college student" in regards to SRL after course completion. Participants were 187 undergraduates enrolled in a course offered by the campus learning center at a large Midwestern university. Document analysis of student essays revealed that students most often viewed time management and motivation as critical to becoming effective college students. Implications for student success course curriculum are discussed.

College Student Success Course Completers' Perceptions of College Student Effectiveness

Student success is a hot topic is higher education. Discussion and research on "what makes an effective college student" abounds. Self-regulated learning (SRL) has been identified as a critical contributor to students' success in college (Fitch, Marshall, & McCarthy, 2012; Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007). SRL is the proactive process whereby students take control of their own learning (Pintrich, 2000). In other words, effective self-regulated learners step into the driver's seat of their college learning instead of letting outsiders—such as instructors and parents—decide when, where, why, and how they should learn. In order to help college students achieve postsecondary success, many institutions have implemented

intervention program or courses designed to increase students' SRL (Wolters & Hoops, 2015). There is one intervention often utilized to strengthen students' SRL engagement and ability: the college student success course (Bembenutty, 2008; Wolters & Hoops, 2015).

College student success courses are semester-long course interventions designed to assist students in becoming more effective self-regulated learners in order to promote their academic success. Student "success" in these courses is often defined and measured by higher semester grade point averages (e.g., Bail, Zhang, & Tachiyama, 2008), retention (e.g., Tuckman & Kennedy, 2011), graduation (e.g., Lang, 2007), and higher levels of self-reported engagement in SRL by course completion (e.g., Hoops, Yu, Burridge, & Wolters, 2015). Indeed, these course interventions appear to make college students more successful—even promoting greater SRL. However, little is known regarding the perceptions of course completers regarding what is needed to become an effective college student.

Understanding the types of skills and traits college students themselves feel are needed to succeed in college is important for three main reasons. One, student success course curriculum should be tailored to meet the specific needs of the student population that each course exists to serve (Hofer, Yu, & Pintrich, 1998). Two, although student success course curriculum is often based on current theory and empirical research, we assert that additional student needs might exist that have yet to be identified by theory. Three, course curriculum may not be calibrated to best meet students' SRL needs. For example, courses may spend too much time covering material college students find irrelevant, or less useful, to their overall success in college. The purpose of this study was to examine student perceptions of "what makes an effective college student" in regards to SRL after completing a student success course. Three specific research questions guided our inquiry.

1. Which aspects of SRL are viewed as most critical to being an effective college student most often by student success course completers?
2. What factors do course completers deem as aspects of an effective college student *outside* of SRL?
3. Are students' views of what makes an effective college student consistent with:

a. SRL theory, and
b. Student success course curriculum?

Theoretical Framework

Across prominent models of SRL (e.g., Pintrich, 2000; Winne & Hadwin, 1998; Wolters, 2003; Zimmerman, 2000), many common components of SRL are identified. We propose a model of college students' SRL that serves as the theoretical framework that guides the current study including three common components of SRL (see Figure 1): (a) Process—steps of SRL; (b) Areas—specific "areas" or components of learning; and (b) Goal Setting—goals that guide the learning process. First, SRL is a process often referred to as a feedback loop (Zimmerman, 2000). Students must constantly plan, put plans into action, and reevaluate their plans in order to ensure that they are learning. This process—Plan, Act, and React (PAR)—is one students can develop, therefore SRL is not an inherent ability or trait (Zimmerman, 2000). However, most college students are not effective at this process when they enter college or they are unaware of their need to self-regulate their own learning (Boekaerts, 1999).

Second, there are four areas of learning present across most models of SRL that students must learn to regulate: (a) Motivation—why students learn; (b) Time – when students learn; (c) Memory—how students learn and use learned information; and, (d) Context—where students learn (e.g., the college environment). These areas are interrelated, meaning regulation in one area influences students' regulation of others (Pintrich, 2000). Motivation is of particular importance as students are unlikely to manage their time, use memory strategies, nor attend to where they study if unmotivated to do so (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2007). Finally, the regulation process (PAR) of the four areas of learning is driven by students' goals (Pintrich, 2000). Students' effort in self-regulating their own learning is guided by both the long- and short-term goals they set for themselves (e.g., becoming a doctor or earning an A on an assignment). We assert that goal setting plays a much larger role in college students' SRL than students at the K-12 level because unlike younger students, college students are granted higher levels of autonomy in their education. Therefore, the goals students set for their own postsecondary education largely determines their SRL efforts and outcomes.

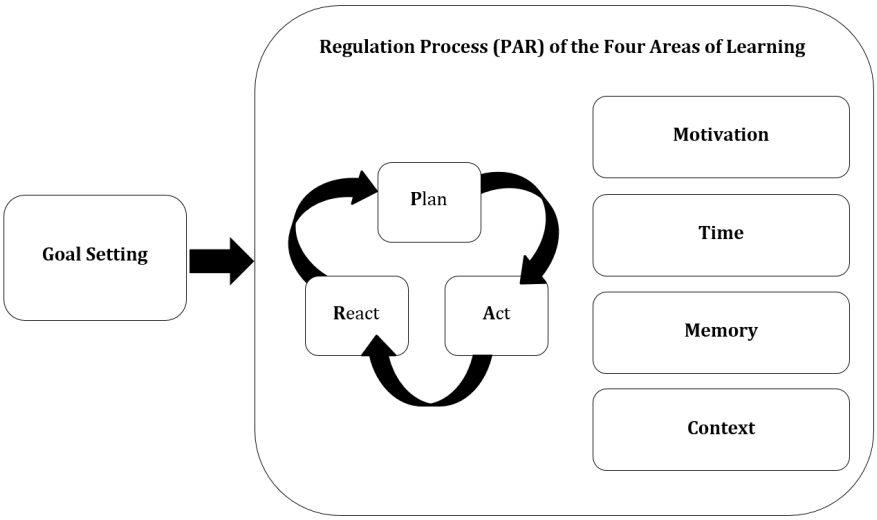

Figure 1. Model of College Students' SRL

Method

This study utilized qualitative methods. Qualitative research privileges the voices, thoughts, and opinions of individuals (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Therefore, qualitative methods were most appropriate for the current study as the purpose is to examine student perceptions of "what makes an effective college student" in regards to SRL after completing a student success course. Methods were guided by the pragmatist paradigm. A pragmatist researcher seeks to conduct practical research with real-life application and results (Ormerod, 2006; Rorty, 1999; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Pragmatic research is guided by the research questions, utilizing methods that are best suited to answer the questions posed (Ormerod, 2006; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Because the current study was conducted specifically to produce results that would influence practice, a pragmatic approach was most appropriate.

Students and Procedure

This study utilized archival data from a fall 2014 student success course at a large Midwestern university's campus learning center. Students enrolled in 16 course sections (N = 352) were required to complete a final course project. Assignment instructions included writing a paper presenting and supporting arguments for three key components of being an effective college student. Relevant

evidence could include course concepts and resources and personal examples. Out of the 352 enrolled students, 187 undergraduates submitted paper versions of this assignment. All students who submitted papers were selected as participants. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) to utilize archival assignment data for research purposes, participants' names and identifying information were redacted from essays to maintain confidentiality.

Although demographic data were not collected as part of this study, the 352 students who enrolled in the student success course during the fall 2014 semester were aged 18-30 and represented more than 100 different majors. Students were 62% male, 66% White, 11% African American, 9% Asian, 5% two or more ethnicities, 1% Hispanic, and 7% undisclosed. The distribution of academic level was 26% first-year, 27% second-year, 22% third-year, and 24% fourth-year students.

Student Success Course Description

The 3-credit hour student success course is offered as an elective to all undergraduate students, regardless of major, academic standing, and classification. Although some students do enroll per request by their advisors, many students enroll per their own volition. The course is designed to help students develop the academic beliefs and behaviors needed to succeed in college. The course is guided by theories of educational psychology and higher education, teaching students both the theories of college student success as well as practical study strategies. Topics include motivation; overcoming procrastination; concentration; memory strategies; exam- and note-taking; strategic reading; asking for help; organizational skills; and connecting to resources.

Analysis

Document analysis (Bowen, 2009) was conducted to categorize student responses through open coding using NVivo 10 qualitative analysis software. Two researchers (authors) coded "chunks" of data—including entire sentences, phrases, or paragraphs—referring to student perceptions of what makes an effective college student in terms of SRL. First, the lead author developed a codebook categorizing student success course curriculum based on the authors'

model of SRL. Codes were created for goal-setting, process of SRL, and each of the four areas of learning (motivation, time, memory, and context). A miscellaneous category was added to capture emergent themes. Second, using the codebook, the lead author analyzed two sections of papers (~10% of total dataset). Third, the second author independently coded all remaining sections using the codebook. Fourth, the lead author reviewed all coded data to ensure consistency. Any discrepancies were resolved by first discussing, then recoding data into more accurate coding categories. Fifth, both researchers met to discuss and agree upon an emergent theme from the miscellaneous category. Sixth, the lead author re-coded all miscellaneous data into either extant SRL categories or the emergent theme. Finally, results of effective student categories in terms of SRL were discussed together to ensure trustworthiness.

To determine whether or not student perceptions were consistent with course curriculum, a content analysis of course curriculum was conducted. For each day of class ($N = 28$), the official course calendar was used to determine which topic(s) were covered that day. Two days had no planned topic, meaning instructors were allowed to cover any topic of their choosing. Therefore, only the 26 days with clear topics covered across sections were used for our analysis. On some class days, more than one topic was covered (e.g., Time Management and Motivation). After topics covered by day were identified, each was classified under the final coding categories in terms of SRL. Last, the percentage of days each topic was covered was calculated and compared to the total codes for "what makes an effective college student?"

Results and Discussion

A total of 616 essay references to what makes an effective college student were coded under seven total categories: (a) Time Management (26%), (b) Motivation (23%), Contextual Regulation (17%), Goal Setting (12%), Memory Strategies (12%), Process of SRL (7%), and Well-Being (4%). Therefore, in regards to our first research question, the aspects of SRL students mentioned most often were time management and motivation. Answering our second question, the only factor that emerged outside SRL was well-being.

What Makes An Effective College Student?

Time management. Time management was described as necessary to be effective in multiple aspects of college. One student wrote, "Proficient time management skills allow you to get all of your work done in an appropriate time frame so you can flourish in both your academic and social life." Time management was described as "an art, taking plenty of trial and error." Students attributed poor time management and procrastination to past failures. Some students wrote entire essays on procrastination. For example, one student entitled their essay, "Procrastination: Control It or Let It Control You."

Motivation. Students referenced motivation as being critical for college success. As one student stated, "Without motivation one has no drive to complete assignments, study for tests and quizzes, or work on projects." Many times motivation was mentioned in connection with other aspects of SRL. For example, one student wrote, "Motivation is one of the best ways to combat procrastination." Types of motivation mentioned included self-efficacy, grit, value, interest, achievement goals, and sense of belonging.

Contextual regulation. Creating a positive learning environment included finding "a place that's quiet and comfortable without any distractions" and willingness to seek help or resources. Multiple students emphasized the important role concentration plays in learning and identified it as a major challenge. However, students relayed the message that concentration is controllable (e.g., "Anyone can better their concentration, it just takes time and practice."). Students also mentioned support systems that included advisors, tutors, libraries, professors, friends, and family members that helped students manage their college course load.

Goal setting. Students emphasized the importance of setting both long- and short-term goals, constantly evaluating goals, and the interrelationship between goals, motivation, and SRL (e.g., "Keeping a desired grade or a desire to master the subject in mind throughout the semester is a good way to keep yourself motivated to do your work, study, and go to class."). One student described goal setting as "essential to being a successful college student. It allows you to see

what you are working towards and what steps you need to take along the way."

Memory strategies. Students described memory as a process. Referenced strategies included taking notes, self-testing, rehearsal, and organizing information. Many students emphasized adapting memory strategies for different class contexts: "If a certain way of studying, like flash cards, works for one class but not another, a student should try something different like making a study sheet or editing/re-reading their notes."

Process of SRL. The importance of SRL, especially monitoring one's own learning (i.e., feedback loop), was also highlighted by students. They described this process as planning, monitoring, and evaluating one's own learning. One student mentioned, "This time last year [before I took this course], I would have never thought about monitoring myself when it came to my progress or to my grades."

Well-being. Finally, students believed well-being contributed to college success. Well-being encompassed getting enough sleep, eating right, exercising, and taking time for yourself. Well-being was described as balance. For example, one student stated, "to be successful, one needs to be balanced. Life is not all about school, and being here at college is a time for students to grow socially, mentally, and emotionally."

Student Perceptions Compared with SRL Theory and Course Curriculum

In regards to our third research question, students' views of what makes an effective college student were more consistent with SRL theory than student success course curriculum. First, models of SRL emphasize the importance and interrelatedness of time management and motivation. Second, students often mentioned one area of SRL in conjunction with another (i.e., motivation reduces procrastination). This view aligns with the view of SRL areas as being interrelated (Pintrich, 2000). Third, across categories, students noted the influence of goals; this finding aligns with the assumption that SRL is a goal-directed process. Finally, students repeatedly proclaimed that SRL can be taught. SRL is assumed to be a learned skill, not a trait. Therefore, students' supposition that anyone can develop SRL

supports both theory and course curriculum.

Table 1 displays the percentages and numbers of all coded references by category in comparison with the total number of days each topic was covered during course enrollment. The largest difference between student perceptions and course curriculum involved memory. Although 58% of course instruction covered memory strategies, only 12% of students mentioned these strategies as important. Given the heavy emphasis of this area of SRL in this course and other student success courses, it appears that what students view as most germane to college student effectiveness does *not* align with current student success course curriculum.

Table 1

Total Coded Essay References to What Makes A Successful College Student in Regards to SRL Compared with Total Days Topics Were Covered in the Student Success Course

	Coded References in Student Essays (*N* = 619)		**Total Days Topic Covered During Course (*N* = 26)**	
Categories	***n***	**%**	***n***	**%**
Time Management	159	26	4	15
Motivation	140	23	3	12
Contextual Regulation	103	17	2	8
Goal Setting	72	12	2	8
Memory Strategies	72	12	15	58
Process of SRL	46	7	3	12
Well-Being	25	4	1	4

Note. On some class days, more than one topic was covered (e.g., Time Management and Motivation). Therefore, the total number of days topics were covered adds up to 30 (> 26 days of class).

Conclusion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to determine students' perceptions of what makes an effective college student in terms of SRL after completing a student success course. We found that students most often viewed time management and motivation as

critical components of student effectiveness. Apart from SRL, students also viewed well-being as important. Dimensions of wellness have recently begun to be incorporated into college student success courses (e.g., Choate & Smith, 2003) given the connection between well-being and achievement. Well-being may become an increasingly important component of these SRL-based courses going forward.

Also related to course curriculum, the perceptions of SRL and what makes an effective college student expressed by students in this study closely aligned with SRL theory. Most importantly, students identified SRL strategies as developed skills versus inherent abilities. It may be that students developed a growth mindset (Dweck, 2006) about SRL strategies as a result of the course versus other experiences that may have influenced their understanding regarding effort and success. However, findings indicate that student success course curriculum did not align with students' views in regards to memory strategies. Memory strategies were covered over half of the semester despite students' views that time management and memory strategies are what make a college student effective. This finding is important and suggests college students are not receiving the instruction and help they most want and need. Although memory strategies are indeed important to learning, research demonstrates these types of strategies play less of a role in college student success than does motivation (Robbins et al., 2004).

Results of this study could be utilized to modify student success course curriculum to reflect more of what both SRL theory and students perceive as what really helps: time management and motivation. Wolters and Hoops (2015) assert that motivational curriculum could be embedded throughout student success course duration; our results support their position. Given that student success courses originated as "study skills" courses focusing on memory strategies to improve student learning deficits in the early 1900s (Casazza, 1999), it is not surprising that modern course curriculum often remains heavily laden with such strategy instruction. However, modern college students appear to view motivational and time management strategies as more critical to their academic success. We recommend that, going forward, student success course curriculum be modified to include more time management and

motivation strategies and less focus on memory strategies to best meet undergraduate college students' needs in order to succeed. However, administrators and instructors of these types of courses should consistently assess their own students' needs in order create a course best calibrated for the students who enroll.

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