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Academic Relevance: College Students' Perspective

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This study examined academic relevance from the perspective of college students. A qualitative focus group method was used to explore how students perceived the applicability and usefulness of their academic courses and coursework. Two focus groups of college students (N = 22) with varied class rank and academic majors were conducted. Data suggests that academic relevance is a complex construct; six distinct domains of academic relevance were identified. Students perceived their course work as relevant to their current and future academic endeavors, vocational preparation, and personal growth and development. Results provide a preliminary factorial structure to an underdeveloped yet important learning construct. Implications are discussed, and suggestions are offered to bolster students' perceptions of academic relevance.

Throughout the history of higher education in America, various stakeholders have scrutinized the curricula of colleges and universities in an attempt to ensure that a college education remains relevant to their interests (Bok, 2006; Shapiro, 2005). The report titled, "A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education," put forth by the Commission on the Future of Higher Education (2006) serves as an example of this scrutiny. In this report, the federal government explicitly advanced the notion that a relevant post-secondary academic curriculum is one that prepares graduates with skills necessary to enter into a 21st century workforce and maintain the global economic fortitude of the nation. Colleges and universities also have well-documented statements that outline specific qualities of an academically-relevant curriculum. For example, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (2010) suggested that an academically relevant curriculum is one that is grounded in the ideals of a liberal education (i.e., it facilitates social responsibility, civic leadership, and ethical fortitude) which are needed to maintain an effective democracy. However, while college students are most directly affected by the curricula of colleges and universities, literature reporting college students' perceptions of the relevance of their academic experience is sparse.

The small body of research that has examined academic relevance from students' perspectives was conducted in the 1960's and 1970's. During that time, post-secondary enrollments swelled with an increasingly diverse student population that demanded coursework that was relevant to their past experiences and future aspirations (Bok, 2006). A 1971 Carnegie Commission Survey highlighted students' concerns; 91percent of the 70,000 students surveyed wanted their academic coursework to be more relevant to contemporary life and current social problems (Trow, 1971). In light of this report, two empirical studies were conducted that examined the underlying factor structure of academic relevance to better understand the concept and develop a measureable construct for psychometric investigation (Menges & Trumpeter, 1972; Permut, 1974). These studies suggested that academic relevance is a multidimensional concept with the most well-defined dimensions being *applicability* and *usefulness*. That is, when students seek relevance in their academic work, they are most concerned with whether they can directly apply the knowledge and learning resulting from this work to address their personal concerns, as well as social issues they deem important. No follow-up studies examining the relevance of academic work as a distinct construct have since been conducted.

As the idealism and activism prominent on campuses simmered during the 1970's and economic concerns began to emerge as a focal issue in the early 1980's, academic relevance became synonymous with the practical vocational value of college coursework. A prominent strand of research examined students' perceptions of the usefulness of their academic work as a predictor of persistence (Bean, 1983; Terenzini & Pascarella, 1977). The results of several studies suggested that students' perceptions of their academic experience as relevant for future employment is positively associated with persistence toward the achievement of academic goals (Bean, 1983; Metzner, 1984). Interestingly, the two most prominent national reports during this time (i.e., *A Nation at Risk*, NCED, 1983, and *To Reclaim a Legacy*, Bennett, 1984) stressed the need to minimize the growing vocational influence of college curricula and to reestablish the humanities and liberal arts as a central curricular feature in higher education.

Since the early 1990's two constructs related to academic relevance and grounded in motivational theories generated a fairly deep body of research. Identified regulation, derived from self-determination theory (SDT; Ryan & Deci, 2000), is an internalized extrinsic motivation. It is extrinsic in that it is related to the performance of activities for the purposes of satisfying external demands, or as a means of acquiring

an end result aside from the enjoyment of the activity itself. It is internalized in that the individual has identified with the personal importance (i.e., relevance) of the activity in terms of their own value system (Jang, 2008). Similarly, the expectancy-value model of achievement choices (Eccles & Wigfield, 2002) posits that the values individuals ascribe to tasks (i.e., task values) contribute to achievement and performance. Utility values are a type of task values that are extrinsic in that their value is perceived as instrumental. However, like identified regulation, utility values can be integrated into one's personal value system and thus become more personally relevant. Both identified regulation and utility value have been associated with greater interest, sustained effort, and achievement in academic settings (Hulleman, Godes, Hendricks, & Harackiewicz, 2010; Jang, 2008; Reeve, Jang, Hardre, & Omura, 2002).

This body of quantitative literature underscores the associations among academic relevance, academic motivation, academic engagement, and performance. Qualitative research may illuminate deeper and more personal meanings individuals hold about their academic endeavors. For example, it is not known if, or to what extent, students seek academic relevance within different life-domains (i.e., career, civic membership, personal development). Moreover, it is not known to what extent the meaning students generate around academic work is related to students' individual and societal values. In 1971, 73 percent of entering freshman stated that developing a meaningful philosophy of life was very important while in college (American Council on Education, 1971). Therefore, it could be assumed that college students at this time perceived a relevant curriculum to be one that facilitated the development of skills needed to search for a meaningful life philosophy.

The call for a more relevant curriculum appears to be on the rise again as the competitiveness of a "high tech" globalized market drives students' and parents' current demands for colleges to provide the most marketable skills available, as well as the business community's demands for a highly skilled and productive workforce (Bok, 2006; Chace, 2009; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005). Current calls for a curriculum providing clear connections to career paths seem congruent with findings from recent research suggesting that students' motivations for attending college are increasingly centered on job obtainment and earning potential (Astin, Oseguera, Sax, & Korn, 2007; Nathan, 2005; Schneider & Humphreys, 2005). Yet it appears that college students do perceive relevance in their academic course work beyond being a means to increase occupational and financial viability. Relatively recent research (Henderson-King & Smith, 2006) indicates that while students are highly motivated by obtaining future earning potential and workforce preparation, they also ascribe broader meaning to the college experience (e.g., opportunity for personal growth, exploration of one's self, and exposure to diverse ideas). However, the notion that students look directly to the academic curriculum as a viable means for making these meanings tangible is highly suspect (Grigsby, 2009; Nathan, 2005).

The purpose of this study was to qualitatively investigate the scope of academic relevance from the perspective of college students. We examined how college students described the relevance of their academic courses and coursework. Investigations reporting the "student voice" can illuminate and challenge premises held by educators and policy makers about learning, engagement in the academic enterprise, and future directions of curriculum reform (Cook-Sather, 2006). Specifically, they can provide insights that guide educational interventions intended to facilitate greater academic motivation and engaged behavior. We also hope to lay an empirical foundation for future quantitative studies designed to develop the construct of academic relevance and the quantitative measurement of this construct.

Method

This study used a focus group research design. Focus groups are a qualitative methodology often used by social science researchers to obtain information about opinions, attitudes, and beliefs around a specific topic or issue (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). Focus groups involve informal discussions on a particular topic with a relatively small number of individuals. They are helpful in understanding individuals' unique experiences in specific settings or during specific events (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Further, focus groups can be particularly useful in the investigation of constructs that have yet to be effectively operationalized (Kress & Shoffner, 2007). Academic relevance is vaguely defined within the educational research. Focus groups allowed us to explore the breadth and depth of the concept of academic relevance.

Participants

Participants were 22 undergraduate students enrolled in one of two sections of a course titled Life Skills for College at a large research university in the southeastern United States. This is a popular elective course designed to develop skills deemed necessary for a successful transition through college and into the world of work. The course focuses on direct application of psychological principles as a means of facilitating students' personal, academic, and professional growth. It is open to all majors and all class ranks. The researchers were deliberate in recruiting participants from these courses as discussion

related to academic experiences and relevance is part of the curriculum. Moreover, due to its elective status, students enrolled in this course usually have a diversity of academic experiences and goals. Referred to as intensity sampling (Patton, 2002), this method of selection is a purposive sampling procedure that is appropriate for focus group research as it furthers the researchers' ability to understand participants' experiences. There were a total of nine men and 13 women represented in the sample. The class rank of the participants included six seniors, five juniors, two sophomore, and nine freshmen all of whom were in good academic standing within the university. Ages of the ranged from 18 to 23 years old. There were 13 distinct declared majors among the participants (e.g., statistics, political science, communications, international affairs, accounting). Two participants were undecided about their major.

Procedure

Data Collection. Prior to data collection, the study procedures were approved by the university's Institutional Review Board. Data was collected during two separate focus group sessions each lasting approximately 45 minutes. Each focus group session consisted of students who were recruited exclusively from one specific session of the aforementioned courses. Recruitment consisted of the second author gaining permission to enter each class to explain the goals and scope of the research, and then to invite students to be participants. One focus group was conducted midway through an academic semester. The second focus group was completed toward the end of the academic term. Each focus group was conducted outside of class time. No incentive was offered for participation other than refreshments. The first author served as moderator and ensured that the experience encouraged open participation while discouraging monopolization of discussion. The second author recorded session results, took field notes, and offered support to the moderator (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

During both sessions, the lead researcher read an informational letter to the potential participants explaining the purpose and procedure of the study, as well as the voluntary nature of participation in the study. Informed consent was obtained from those who chose to participate. At the commencement of the focus groups, the researchers briefly defined relevance as the perceived usefulness, purpose, and/or applicability of academic courses and the related academic course work. A series of questions were discussed for the duration of the focus group. The three questions that precipitated the focus group discussions were as follows: In what ways are the courses that you are presently taking, or have taken in the past, relevant to your life? How are the homework assignments or academic tasks within the courses you have taken relevant to your life? Can you provide examples of classes and related course work that you did not find particularly relevant to your life? Follow-up questions were often asked to clarify, and semi-structured conversations often pursued. The answers given by the students were recorded with a tape recorder and were later transcribed verbatim by the lead researcher.

Data Analysis. The constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used to analyze data. This method is an iterative process used to identify themes and understand meaning from qualitative data. The constant comparative method is commonly used for analyzing focus group narrative data (Leech & Onwuegbuzie, 2008). First, complete transcriptions from each focus group were read several times by both researchers. Then the researchers independently engaged in a process of open coding, whereby descriptors or codes were attached to chunks of data. After creating separate codes the researchers discussed their codes with each other. Discrepancies were discussed, and codes were refined until agreement on a list of defined codes was reached. Then researchers returned to reading the transcripts independently to apply the refined codes to the entire data. Finally, researchers again collaboratively combined codes into overreaching categories and subcategories that reflected themes that emerged from the data. To ensure the credibility of the results, a member checking procedure was employed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Several participants were given data analysis results along with a questionnaire and rating form. These participants were asked to provide written feedback regarding their perception of the accuracy of the findings.

Results

Two types of academic relevance emerged from the data: direct relevance and indirect relevance. Within each type of relevance, three distinct categories were identified representing specific life domains: academics, occupation, and personal development.

Direct Relevancy

Participants described academic endeavors that required little to no inference to understand their usefulness. Students clearly verbalized the direct and immediate applicability of their academic endeavors in terms of meeting current and future goals. Students often talked about academic courses and their experiences without specifics (e.g., course titles, subjects). However, they also mentioned specific academic tasks (e.g., group projects, math problems, and reading assignments) associated with their

coursework. The students discussed both past and present academic experiences.

Direct Academic Relevancy. Eight students provided a combined total of 12 comments reflecting the notion that specific courses or academic tasks were relevant because they were necessary for accomplishing their academic goals (i.e., obtaining a degree, entering a specific major). That is, specific courses or specific academic tasks were directly relevant because they were institutionally assigned prerequisites. For example, Participant 14 remarked:

> I mean not [relevant] so much for another class, but for overall being able to get my degree. Like because it is required by the University, I was, like, okay I have to sit down. I have to do this.

When asked why he decided to take a geology class he found uninteresting, his response was, "If you want to graduate, you have to take it. It's just like a required course, you know, and I had to pick a physical science." Participant 6 also described direct academic relevancy:

> Well, I'm taking pre-cal [calculus] right now, and I'm really struggling with that class…I came in as a pre-business major, so pre-cal is required, but I'm thinking of switching to something like political science where it doesn't matter, so you know the relevancy of pre-cal just really drops.

Direct Occupational Relevancy. Six participants mentioned a total of seven experiences where academic tasks were perceived as being directly applicable to future occupational or career goals. These students conveyed the belief that academic content or tasks were essentially offering them a job skill or occupational knowledge they would use at work in the future. Perceptions of direct occupational relevancy were usually mentioned when referring to upper-level major classes, but they also included references to lower-level courses that taught specific knowledge and tasks needed in an occupation. For example, when mentioning an introductory course on the fundamentals of Microsoft Excel's application in the business world, Participant 10 stated, "You know, Excel is not the most exciting subject to learn about but if you eventually run a business, you are going to need to know how to use databases and spreadsheets, and stuff." Participant 5 mentioned how specific knowledge gained through academic work had direct occupational relevance by stating the following:

> I mean I had a class and the way he showed us it was relevant was kind of harsh because [it was] the law of communications class and basically every time you gave an answer that was wrong or, I guess, yeah anytime you gave an answer that was wrong, he was like, "you just got sued," or "you're fired from your job!"

Participant 7 also discussed direct occupational relevance in more general terms:

> I am here to learn, not just to learn to get to another class, you know, so I can get through my major. But I'm here to learn, you know, about the real world so I can get out there and you know do whatever I need to do.

Finally, Participant 19 reflected that her special education class was directly relevant to her future occupation. "Well, my major is communication science and disorders, and I'll be working with special education children so that's why it's relevant."

Direct Personal Relevancy. Four participants mentioned six distinct experiences in which their course work directly facilitated their personal development, whether this referred to honing a tangible skill such as money or time management, or more abstract benefits such as increased self-awareness or psychological growth. Participant 5 offered an example of direct personal relevancy:

> I currently am in a class, which is household and consumer economics, and it's really boring, but it's completely relevant to my life, um. She [the teacher] basically gives examples of either a young single person or a young married couple and then we have to learn how to do our finances, decide whether we are going to, you know, buy or rent, how to do a mortgage, how to decide what kind of mortgage you want. Like it's really boring but I am going to need it every [sic] single piece of information that's in that class.

Similarly, Participant 7 stated how an academic experience was directly relevant to his personal growth:

> I found it, you know, very relevant to find out, you know like, what type of personality type I am….I think finding yourself is really important in this stage of life. Still people, you know, go through all these classes and it's just, you know, numbers and words and you know, you don't really discover who you are.

Indirect Relevancy

The participants in this study also described academic activities that were not immediately or directly applicable to the accomplishment of a life goal.

In many of these instances students extrapolated or made inferences to clarify how specific academic activities would eventually lead to the development of new skills (i.e., critical thinking) that would be relevant to their lives. As with perceptions of direct relevancy, students talked about academic courses generally, as well as specific academic tasks.

Indirect Academic Relevancy. Two participants referred to specific coursework that facilitated the development of a skill they needed for a future course or for a future academic endeavor. For example, Participant 14 stated, "I'm a statistics major right now…Three or four years ago when I started taking my core classes, I didn't need to apply anything I learned to other classes. Now the knowledge from my pre-recs [required prerequisites] for my major are the things I need to know for my major classes right now." Participant 14 also referred to indirect academic relevancy by stating his difficulty finding it: "Half way through the semester you're like this stuff is so boring. Is this class really relevant to my degree? Am I really ever going to use this information in law school? It doesn't mean anything."

Indirect Occupational Relevancy. Four participants referred to a specific course or a specific academic task they perceived as useful because the course or task facilitated the acquisition of new skills that would eventually be needed for the world of work (i.e., career exploration, critical thinking, problem solving), but not for the accomplishment of a specific work task. The comments that reflect this domain tend to refer to courses in general. Participant 4 stated the following:

> But I also think it is important to have them [freshman core classes] because as freshmen they come in [to the university] not having any idea what they want to do, so it's like because you do have to take all these different types of classes, you kind of find out what you want to do. Like I'm an accounting major and I didn't even know what an accounting major was until I came here and took my accounting class because it was required, and then I fell in love with it.

Participant 7 referred to an assignment he had completed for an elective class: "It's relevant just because I think trying to find out how you really are goes a long way in deciding, you know, what your career path may be and what you want to major in." Finally, participant 18 mentioned how the knowledge from a philosophy class can be applied as a lawyer:

> It teaches you like how to think and how to analyze in different situations. And I don't know. I want to be a lawyer, so that's helpful. Just like when I get into arguments: it's good to know how to think critically.

Indirect Personal Relevancy. The most common type of reference made by students regarding the indirect relevancy of their academic experiences was in relation to how these experiences facilitated their personal development. Six participants made references to this domain. Participant 10 stated, "I think there are certain courses that people don't want to take but I think you might be a better person for taking them." Participant 4 reiterated this sentiment by stating:

> Biology, never in my life will I use that information again. Like things like that, I just think it's important to become a well-rounded individual and have a lot of different knowledge about a lot of different things, like political science, science, or government.

Participant 5 further reinforced this perception: "I really strongly think everyone should have some knowledge of political science or history or something like that." When pressed to defend her position, she continued:

> Because I think that history is happening right now. You need to know what happened and why things are the way they are before you can just go, before you can really live a, I can't think of the right word, I don't want to say productive. I guess yeah, an informed life.

When probed to clarify this statement, Participant 5 added, "I think that people need to know that they just can't turn a blind eye to and let other people run their life for them." Participant 7 added, "I think it's very good to have history and politics…at least a general understanding of how things are in life so you can be an informed citizen."

Discussion

We used focus groups to explore academic relevance among college students and extend results from previous quantitative studies. The results suggest that academic relevance is more complex than previously reported. Most notably, students described specific life domains in which they thought their academic work and experiences would be directly or indirectly applicable. The experiences shared by participants offer descriptions of this complexity.

The most prevalent dimension of academic relevancy to emerge was direct academic relevancy, which is the notion that specific courses or academic tasks are relevant because they are necessary for achievement of specific institutional requirements such as a curricular prerequisite or degree requirement. Each

reference to direct academic relevancy was coupled with three specific feelings; lack of autonomy, disinterest, and displeasure resulting from engagement in coursework. For example, when conveying reasons that his geology class was relevant, Participant 14 stated, "You're in constant drudgery. I'm never going to study what a rock is. It's just like a required course, you know, and I had to pick a physical science course….I don't really like science classes. So I am like stuck in it."

In this light, direct academic relevancy is similar to external regulation, which is the least autonomous form of external motivation within the aforementioned self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). External regulation is related to behaviors that are performed with the purpose of satisfying external demands or as a means of acquiring an end result. Although purposeful, these behaviors are not integrated into one's value system and therefore are often related to feelings antithetical to psychological well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000). For example, Pisarik, 2009 reported finding that higher levels of external regulation were associated with higher levels of cynicism regarding engagement in academic activities among college students.

Direct occupational relevancy was the second most frequently reported category. This category referred to students' perceptions that their academic coursework provided a specific job skill or specific knowledge they could directly transfer to their desired occupation. This dimension reflects the growing emphasis in American society on the vocational purpose of higher education in which higher education is predominantly viewed as a means of securing individual occupational prosperity and stability (Grubb & Lazerson, 2005). The participants however, seemed to convey two differing perceptions of relevancy within this dimension: academics as a means to get a job and academics as a means to do a job. The first is indicative of a reward contingency and congruent with Ryan and Deci's (2000) aforementioned motivational dimension of external regulation located in the occupational realm of life. One participant stated that it was simply important to spend time taking classes and picking a major that will lead to a specific job. The second perception connotes a process of internalizing the value of academic work. For example, some participants spoke about how the content of specific courses would help prepare them to be competent, effective, and successful in their future occupations. This provides an example of Ryan and Deci's (2000) internalization process indicative of identified regulation in which individuals deepen the degree of meaning and value they ascribe to their behavioral goals.

Direct personal relevancy, which was modestly reported, depicted participants' perception that their academic coursework was directly applicable to the accomplishment of a personal goal. These personal goals were tangible (e.g., managing money), as well as abstract (e.g., gaining self-awareness and growing personally). The purpose of higher education in America has historically been perceived more broadly than simply a forum for intellectual development (Bok, 2006). In fact, a college education is often characterized as a combination of vocational training, intellectual development, and personal development. Research has suggested that college students increasingly perceive the importance of college in terms of social learning and personal growth and development (Schneider & Humphreys, 2005). However, they are inclined to believe that experiences outside of the classroom and aside from academics are more significant in facilitating this learning (Arum & Roksa, 2010; Nathan, 2005). Our results suggest that some students may still perceive a connection between the academic experiences related to the college curriculum and their personal growth and development.

Indirect academic relevancy refers to participants' perceptions that the skills they gained by engaging in academic course work (e.g., self-exploration, critical thinking, objective analysis, ethical decision making) would be applicable to current or future academic pursuits. This was the least frequently reported category, and the few students who made reference to academics as being relevant in this way had difficulty doing so. This difficulty seems to highlight the fragmented nature of the college curriculum within large universities (Coye, 1997). The current general education model adopted by most American colleges and universities attempts to facilitate a breadth of knowledge by requiring students to take two or three courses within several disciplines of knowledge. However, faculty rarely teach across disciplines, academic departments rarely collaborate, and courses are rarely co-taught by instructors from differing academic disciplines (Bok, 2006). The results of this study may point to the consequences of this fragmentation. That is, students may find it difficult to grasp central themes within a curriculum, and they may not recognize the skills of critical inquiry that are congruent and transferable across classes, majors, and disciplines.

Indirect occupational relevancy, a dimension endorsed by several participants, refers to perceptions that specific academic tasks are useful in acquiring non-tangible skills that will be essential for entry into the world of work. These skills again include intellectual skills such as critical thinking, problem solving, analytical thinking, and personal developmental processes such as career exploration, self-exploration, and self-discovery. Many students enter college undecided about their academic major and their future vocational pursuits, and over 50 percent change majors before graduating (Gayle, 2005; Gordon, 1995). Our results suggest that students are able to view the

academic curriculum, and more specifically the general education curriculum, not solely as a venue for acquiring tangible occupational knowledge and skills, but also as a means of acquiring the intellectual and self-explorative skills that are increasingly being reported as essential for continued career self-management and sustainability in the 21st century (Niles, 2011).

Finally, participants endorsed the notion that their academic coursework was relevant because it was a means of gaining knowledge and skills needed to develop into a well-rounded and functioning adult. We labeled this dimension indirect personal relevancy. When referring to this dimension, students mentioned the importance of acquiring a broad base of knowledge and developing intellectual skills much like they did when referring to indirect occupational relevancy. However, this dimension was unique in that students perceived that this knowledge and skill set would be applicable to their personal lives and eventually to their ability to engage in civically-oriented goals. Recent scholarly commentary has suggested a widening rift between the instrumental and vocationally-driven educational goals endorsed by college students and the intellectually, morally, and civically inclined curricular goals of college faculty (Arum & Roksa, 2010; Grubb, & Lazerson, 2005). The desire to earn an education as a means of becoming a well-rounded person and a contributing participant in society contradicts a current belief that intellectual development and civic engagement are no longer educational goals of many college students. Although participants had difficulty articulating academic relevance within this dimension, they clearly implied that what is considered a hallmark of a liberal education, such as foundational knowledge of culture, nature, and our society (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2010), was relevant for living a good life and being an active citizen.

Implications

As the twenty-first century unfolds, public discussion continues regarding the ability of colleges and universities to prepare students to embark on the economic and civic challenges ahead. Central to this discussion is an examination of the relevance of academic curricula. The most recent comprehensive discussion regarding the relevance of a college education stems from the LEAP (i.e., Liberal Education and America's Promise) initiative sponsored by AAC&U. LEAP proposes that a relevant college education facilitates essential skills beyond specific occupational knowledge, including critical and creative thinking, written and oral communication, intercultural competence, and civic knowledge. LEAP deems such skills essential for successful performance in highly skilled work indicative of the 21st century, maintenance of a healthy lifestyle in a complex world, and engagement as an active citizen in a pluralistic democracy.

Interestingly, past research suggests that these values are not generally espoused by students (Humphreys & Davenport, 2005). Few of the participants in our study came close to articulating the relevancy of academics in these terms. These findings put forth the notion that while educators, administrators, and policy makers may articulate the most noble and beneficent positions regarding the relevance of academics, the message may not be making it to the students in terms they can understand or articulate. Given the exorbitant cost of higher education and crippling debt many students accrue while in college, it becomes a moral imperative that colleges and universities communicate the educational goals and objectives of their institutions effectively. That is, every attempt should be made to clearly convey the desired outcomes of each academic task and the curriculum as a whole to each student.

When the participants were able to clearly articulate the relevance of their academic experiences, they did so in instrumental terms (i.e., a means to fulfilling academic requirements, obtaining degrees, and securing eventual employment). This mindset was often accompanied by feelings of disengagement. While past research reinforces this relationship (Jang, 200), suggestions on how to engender relevancy beyond this basic instrumental mindset can be found in the literature. For example, when educators simply and directly communicate the relevancy of specific academic tasks (e.g., the usefulness of algebra for dosage calculation in nursing), students report perceiving greater value in the activity, greater competence, and increased involvement (Shechter, Durik, Miyamoto, & Harackiewicz, 2011). This should be considered minimal good practice for all educators in higher education. Yet it should be noted that this practice still focuses on extrinsic task values and therefore may simply postpone feelings of disengagement and boredom. A more effective approach is to provide students opportunities to develop their own ideas and meanings for why academic tasks are relevant to their lives, as this has a greater impact on interest and involvement as students internalize the value of the academic work at hand (Hulleman & Harackiewicz, 2009). This practice therefore should be considered a commonly used best practice for educators.

However, the findings of this study suggest that when task values become more abstract, students at worst may have no awareness of the essential "indirect relevancy" of their academic endeavors, and at best may struggle to articulate this relevancy. This level of abstraction is most prevalent in the first two years of

college when students often embark on their general education requirements that comprise the liberal education curriculum. For example, while faculty may see the development of critical thought and civic understanding as the most salient outcomes of a history class, the accounting student may contemplate on the age-old question, "Why do I need to take this class?," as there seems to be no applicability of studying history to "doing" accounting.

Curriculum wide initiatives may be more effective at facilitating such indirect relevancy. Several universities have engaged in efforts to adopt a general education curriculum that includes courses that instill indirect relevancy. The University of Florida now offers a humanities course that focuses on relationships between students' natural inclinations to explore their developing self-identities and the enduring philosophical questions such as, "What is The Good Life?" Such curriculum changes can help students abstract up and facilitate "indirect personal relevance." When pre-pharmacy students reported difficulty in understanding the relevance of the physics prerequisite to the overall pharmacy curriculum at St. Louis College of Pharmacy, the faculty redesigned the course. The new learning objectives are to facilitate greater understanding of the human body as a means for comprehending principles related to physics, as well as critical thinking in general. This speaks to the participants notions of "indirect occupational relevance."

Lastly, institution wide initiatives aimed at increasing students' understanding of the learning outcomes of their courses and a college education can impact students' ability to perceive the concrete and abstract relevancy of their academic work. The University of Georgia, for example, instituted a first-year seminar program aimed at introducing the purpose and importance of the academic enterprise to all incoming freshmen. All freshmen enroll in a seminar of their choice that is developed and taught by a tenured faculty member and that focuses on the research and teaching interest of that faculty. Faculty are called to encourage students to develop an awareness of the university's mission, and the purpose of engaging in academic endeavors related to that mission. Butler University's Liberal Arts Matters program has multiple initiatives aimed at transforming the student culture so that students have greater understanding and appreciation for how academic work, and the curriculum at large, facilitates abstract outcomes of a liberal education (i.e., problem-solving, critical thinking skills, and a civic mindset). Initiatives include essay contests in which students are invited to consider the relevance of liberal education outcomes, statements of academic relevance provided by each faculty member and posted on all syllabi, and an omnipresent college core values statement that pays tribute to the purpose and aims of a liberal arts education. Such initiatives can be considered good faith efforts and best practices related to an institution's attempt at being forthright and intentional regarding not only the educational process, but also the product that students can expect at the end of their endeavor.

Limitations and Future Research

This study, as with all qualitative studies, has specific limitations regarding the generalizability of the findings. The sample, as with most qualitative studies, was small and not randomly selected. The participants were traditional-aged college students attending a competitive public research university. The results should be interpreted in this context. This sample represented students from a wide range of majors. Future studies might examine differences between majors, for example, liberal arts majors and business majors. Future studies might also examine the generalizability of these findings to different populations such as non-traditional or part-time community college students. Also, qualitative studies are inherently subject to the biases of the researchers. Although we attempted to minimize these biases through prolonged engagement with the data and member checks, possible bias due to our unique cultural perceptions should be recognized.

The six domains of relevancy that emerged in this study provide a template for exploring academic relevancy more closely in the future. However, a couple of the domains were underrepresented and thus lack depth and definitional clarity. For example, the domains of indirect academic and indirect occupational relevancy emerged from experiences shared by two to four participants. Future studies may focus specifically on examining these domains using a more directed qualitative research method such as direct content analysis using semi-structured individual interviews to garner more participant details regarding their experiences. As the concepts become more clear, steps can be taken to develop measurement tools with the goal of quantitatively exploring the extent to which both students and institutions of higher education are achieving their desired learning outcomes.

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