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Are Academically At-Risk College Students More Entitled Than Their Non-at-Risk Peers?

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Abstract

Academic Entitlement (AE) is a belief held by students that they deserve high grades in school despite a lack of effort put forth into their work (Chowning & Campbell, 2009). Although AE has become a major focus of conversation amongst higher education professionals, few studies have been published on this topic in relationship to student retention and success. The purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between academic performance and AE for two college student groups. Results included academically at-risk students scoring significantly higher on AE than the non-at-risk group, with AE being negatively correlated with GPA.

Are Academically At-Risk College Students More Entitled Than their Non-at-Risk Peers?

Academic entitlement (AE) has recently become a controversial issue among higher education professionals (e.g., podcasts, YouTube videos, commentary posted on the Chronicle of Higher Education website). According to Greenberger, Lessard, Chen, and Farruggia (2008), AE is characterized by student demands for high marks despite putting forth an amount of effort that warrants lower grades. And although it is a term that has been bandied about in the media, AE has received only minimal scholarly attention. Yet this attitude has been speculated to be the cause of inappropriate student behaviors such as expressing anger or being rude to the instructor, talking on a cell phone or sleeping during lecture, having side conversations with other students during class (Mellor, 2011) and disregarding

mandatory campus events (Kopp & Finney, 2013), to name a few. These inappropriate behaviors present significant obstacles to teaching and learning, which limits instructor effectiveness. And, in this age of high stakes testing and faculty accountability, it is clear that additional information on student attitudes towards education and achievement would benefit educators.

Academic Entitlement Literature

Professors have been noting incidences in the AE literature based upon personal experience (Dubovsky, 1986). The following comment, shared by an academically at-risk undergraduate, who was enrolled in one of the researcher's courses, is an example of what is considered to be academically entitled behavior. Not only is disrespect towards the instructor exhibited, but also evident is the student's disregard for course assignments and learning environment, as

this comment was included in an assigned paper addressing the student's utilization of study skills:

I see this assignment as busy work and a total waste of time. The other night I played Call of Duty instead of studying for a test and still got a B. [...] if you [instructor's name] plan on giving me a bad grade because I don't agree with anything you have had us do; then you are a miserable person who only wishes to tick everybody off.

This and similar behaviors can be the source of aggravation and stress for many professors and can be especially frustrating for those who invest a great deal of time and energy in working to optimize the learning process for students.

The Need for Future Research on AE

Although there appears to be a growing sense of entitlement in the current generation (Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, & Reinhardt, 2010; Singleton-Jackson, Jackson, & Reinhardt, 2011), few studies have been conducted on AE specifically. According to Singleton-Jackson et al. (2011), research still needs to be conducted on the accurate defining, measuring, and understanding of AE's role in student academic success. Little is known about its influence on student learning or academic performance. In fact, a Boolean search for "academic entitlement" in peer-reviewed journals via EBSCOhost yielded just over a dozen entries. And of these studies, a small minority has actually addressed the relationship between AE and student academic performance (Greenberger et al., 2008; Jackson et al., 2011).

The History of AE

Entitlement was first placed within an academic context by Dubovsky (1986) who taught medical students. Kopp, Zinn, Finney, and Jurich (2011) built their research upon Dubovsky's, along with Achacoso's (2002), Chowning and Campbell's (2009), Greenberger et al.'s (2008), Hersh and Merrow's (2005), and Shelley's (2005). Kopp et al. (2011) conceptualized academically entitled students as holding beliefs that: 1) students "deserve to learn" and that learning should not be strenuous; 2) students should not have to be proactive in gathering information for greater knowledge; rather, the professor is responsible for that; 3) any learning-related problems are not due to the deficiencies of the student, but rather, are due to deficiencies of the academic domain, the instructor, etc.; 4) students should be able to dictate the policies made by the instructor for the course; and 5) since students pay to be at the university, they have a right to certain grades. These behaviors present obstacles to the learning process and reflect attitudes within the academic environment.

Clearly, students' attitudes influence their learning (Greenberger et al., 2008; Hsieh, Sullivan, & Guerra, 2007; Jackson, Singleton-Jackson, & Frey, 2011; Pino & Smith, 2004; Singleton-Jackson et al., 2011) and we measure their learning by their earned grades and their GPAs. Thus, it was surprising that Greenberger et al. (2008) found no statistically significant relationship between AE values and GPA. However, other researchers have found a relationship between AE and other academic and gender-related variables. Hartman (2012) discovered that male students experienced an increase in AE during the latter half of their college careers while female students experienced

a decline during that same period. Taking into consideration the studies conducted by Greenberger et al. (2008) and Hartman (2012), it appears that the relationship between AE and GPA has only been minimally researched and, thus, warrants further exploration. This study will extend both Hartman's (2012) and Greenberger et al.'s (2008) research to determine if AE and GPA are significantly related to one another.

AE and Millennials

In addition to the research cited above, several studies (Achacoso, 2002; Chowning & Campbell, 2009; Greenberger et al., 2008; Hartman, 2012; Kopp et al., 2011) have been conducted that explored AE levels within the current cohort of college students, termed the Millennial Generation. Millennials are generally considered to be individuals who were born between the years of 1982 and 2009 (Alexander & Sysko, 2011), although these boundary years vary slightly in the literature. Although Millennials have been acknowledged as having a variety of specific strengths, such as appreciating teamwork in the classroom, being adept at using technology, desiring social connectedness, and devotion to specific supervisors as opposed to organizations (Alexander & Sysko, 2011; McGlynn, 2008; Papp, 2010), they have also been called hedonistic, narcissistic (Alexander & Sysko, 2011), entitled, and unhappy (Twenge, 2006). One of the aims of this study is to further explore how academic entitlement manifests and is related to the academic performance of this generation of college students. The majority of participants polled in the current study can be classified as Millennials, which makes this research important to consider.

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012), 68% of individuals aged 16-24 attended college in 2011; this translates roughly into 12.8 million students. All of these individuals can be categorized as members of the Millennial population. Millennials, like other generations, may be drawn towards pursuing a degree in higher education for reasons that include earning higher salaries over the course of their lifetimes as well as acquiring the skills necessary to fulfill certain job requirements (Carnevale, Strohl, & Melton, 2012). Even though many individuals aspire to obtain an advanced degree, not all students will actually complete their degree programs. Many will either drop out completely or drop back in the number of hours attempted each semester. Others may earn failing grades in their coursework that will result in academic probation (James & Graham, 2010). And, not surprisingly, researchers have found that students who are on probation have a much lower likelihood of graduating from college than those whose performance is above the threshold for probationary status (Mathies, Gardner, & Webber Bauer, 2006).

In order to help this current generation of college students, many universities have established retention programs. Specifically, the purpose of such programs is to help students with low grades become more successful academically. Although such programs exist, James and Graham (2010) argued that determining exactly which interventions are useful in helping students succeed is not an easy task. Furthermore, Trombley (2000) stated that many retention programs implement interventions despite having only a limited understanding of their students. The aim of the current study is to explore the relationship between academic

performance and AE, which may be of particular interest to retention program personnel.

Contributors to AE

Researchers have not yet reached a consensus as to what has led to the “AE movement”. Some believe that parenting practices (Greenberger et al., 2008) and the self-esteem era (Twenge, 2006) may have contributed to students developing AE. Others speculate that professors who give higher grades than what students deserve in the hopes of receiving positive teaching evaluations (Lippmann, Bulanda, & Wagenaar, 2009) could have contributed to this AE issue. Interestingly, some researchers have found AE to be associated with low self-esteem (Greenberger et al., 2008), while others have found just the opposite (Baer & Cheryomukhin, 2011). Additionally, Kopp et al. (2011) found that an external locus of control is more likely to be found in those who are academically entitled. Low self-esteem has been associated with external locus of control in previous studies (Man & Devisse, 1987). These findings may make one wonder: Are academically entitled students created as a result of parenting, professors, self-esteem or locus of control issues? Although some of these questions are beyond the scope of this article, the results of the current study may provide a foundation for future research in these areas.

Purpose

Increasing student retention is the goal of many universities. Students who do not make satisfactory grades may face academic probation, suspension, or dismissal. The purpose of this study was to provide a foundation for empirically investigating the relationship between AE

and academic success. With academic entitlement being such a controversial issue, the researchers thought it would be important to explore in greater depth the relationship between AE and Grade Point Average (GPA), while also comparing at-risk students with non-at-risk ones. The results of this research may increase the awareness of AE for many university personnel, including retention staff, faculty, and administrators, who work on a daily basis to assist college students at every level.

Methods

Participants

This study took place during the Spring 2013 semester. Volunteers were obtained using purposive sampling and included undergraduates from a medium-sized public university in the Southeastern United States. After the IRB office approved the study, the researchers asked the retention program coordinator for permission to poll her academic readmission students, which would comprise the academically at-risk group. The researchers also asked a psychology instructor for permission to poll the introductory psychology students, which would comprise the non-at-risk student sample. Once the researchers received permission to proceed, psychology students were able to enroll in the study through SONA, a software program that is used to manage subject pools. The academic readmission students were sent the link via Blackboard, a site that is used to manage college courses. Both sets of groups could access a link that routed them to Qualtrics, an online software program where data can be collected for research purposes. Once in Qualtrics, students viewed the informed consent documents, gave their permission to participate, and completed the survey and

demographics questionnaire. After participating, their instructors allotted them either course credit or extra credit, depending on the course. The researchers then obtained students' cumulative GPA's by running a report in the university's SAP system, a student management database.

Next, student identification numbers were checked to make sure a student did not take the survey twice, in case they were enrolled in both a psychology course and an academic readmission program course. If a student took the survey twice, his or her first set of scores were kept while the second set of scores were eliminated from the analysis. Additionally, if students' cumulative resident GPA was 2.0 or above prior to the spring 2013 semester, their responses were placed in the academically non-at-risk category; if their GPA was below 2.0, their responses were placed in the academically at-risk category.

Instrumentation

The Academic Entitlement Questionnaire (AEQ), designed by Kopp et al. (2011), is a self-report assessment that was designed to measure AE. The AEQ is comprised of eight items, which can be rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale that ranges from 1, "Strongly Disagree," to 7, "Strongly Agree." Statements included those such as, "I am a product of my environment. Therefore, if I do poorly in class, it is not my fault," "It is the professor's responsibility to make it easy for me to succeed," and "Because I pay tuition, I deserve passing grades" (Kopp et al., 2011, pp. 125-126). The AEQ has been recognized as having desirable reliability (coefficient omega = .81, .84, Kopp et al., 2011; $w = .83, .84$, Kopp & Finney, 2013) and validity (R^2 for both samples varied between .21 and

.60, Kopp et al., 2011; $k = .29, p < .01$, Kopp & Finney, 2013).

The demographics questionnaire contained questions regarding age, ethnicity, and gender. Additional information, including number of attempted and completed credit hours, in addition to GPA, was also obtained. This information is important to know when comparing the at-risk group versus the non-at-risk group and is also helpful to consider for future studies and post-hoc analyses. Little research has been conducted on the relationship between AE and these variables, hence the reason for collecting this data.

Research Hypotheses

Several research hypotheses were explored in this study including:

RQ1: Is there a significant difference between at-risk and non-at-risk students for AE?

RQ2a: Is there a significant relationship between academic performance and AE for non-at-risk students?

RQ2b: Is there a significant relationship between academic performance and AE for at-risk students?

RQ2c: Is there a significant relationship between academic performance and AE for all students?

Results

Three hundred eighty-five responses were initially obtained. Of those responses, 165 at-risk and 146 non-at-risk were kept, for a total of 311 responses.

The other responses were not used, due to either duplicates (e.g., students being enrolled in both courses and taking the survey twice) or not completing the entire survey. The average age of the academically at-risk students was 22.05 years, while the average age of the non-at-risk students was 19 years. Demographic information for both groups is displayed below, in Table 1.

Table 1: *Demographic information for academically at-risk and non-at-risk students.*

	At-Risk (n=165)	Non-At-Risk (n=146)
Gender		
% Male	59.4	20.5
% Female	40.6	79.5
Race		
% African American	30.3	15.1
% Asian	2.4	0.7
% Caucasian	61.8	78.1
% Latino/Latina	0.6	2.1
% Middle-Eastern	0.6	1.4
% Other	4.2	2.7

GPA and credit hours are displayed for both groups in Table 2, below.

Table 2: *GPA and credit hours for academically at-risk and non-at-risk students.*

	At-Risk (n=165)	Non-At-Risk (n=146)
GPA		
Mean Cumulative	1.52	3.05
Range	0.00-1.99	2.00-4.00
Standard Deviation	0.46	0.59

Credit hours		
Mean Resident		
Hours Attempted	76.62	39.9
Range	24-198	24-165
Standard Deviation	34.92	23.17
Mean Resident		
Hours Completed	57.84	38.52
Range	3-165	19-158
Standard Deviation	30.71	21.06

Research Questions Analysis

Hypothesis 1.

A significant difference was expected between academically at-risk and non-at-risk college students for AE. An independent samples t-test revealed that there was a significant difference, $t(309) = -2.610, p = .009$, between academically at-risk and non-at-risk students for this construct. Non-at-risk students scored lower ($M = 25.47, SD = 6.69$) than at-risk students ($M = 27.59, SD = 7.58$) on AE. Confidence intervals were fairly narrow and ranged from -0.52 to -3.73.

Hypothesis 2a.

A significant correlation was expected between academic performance and AE for non-at-risk students. A Pearson product-moment correlation revealed that there was not a significant correlation between these two variables, $r = -.101, p > .05$.

Hypothesis 2b.

A significant correlation was expected between academic performance and AE for academically at-risk students. A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis revealed that there was not a significant correlation between these two variables, $r = .048, p > .05$.

Hypothesis 2c.

A significant correlation was expected between academic performance and AE for all students. A Pearson product-moment correlation analysis revealed that there was a significant correlation between AE and GPA for all students, $r = -.150$, $p < .01$.

Discussion

AE and Academic Standing

The results of this study show that academically at-risk students scored significantly higher on AE than non-at-risk students. Taking into consideration the literature that has been written on AE, one could arrive at the conclusion that these results indicate that academically at-risk students may, therefore, be more likely to maintain and express academically entitled beliefs and behaviors than non-at-risk students.

According to Kopp et al.'s (2011) conceptualization of AE, academically entitled students believe that they have a right to an education and that this process should not be taxing; that their instructors are in charge of disseminating information to them, thereby making the students passive learners; that issues which arise in learning are not the students' fault but instead, are the fault of the institution, educators, etc.; that students should be given the power to amend course policies created by their professors; and, last, that they are owed certain grades since they are paying for their education. The results of the current study indicate that academically at-risk students may be more likely to maintain these AE-laden beliefs.

Additionally, some researchers (Chowning & Campbell, 2009) propose that AE is linked to uncivil student

behaviors. Mellor (2011) conceptualized such behaviors as expressing boredom in class, acting in a rude or angry manner towards the instructor, speaking at inappropriate times with classmates or talking on the phone, sleeping, exiting the classroom without permission, using technology inappropriately, and/or trying to negotiate higher grades with the instructor in a discourteous fashion. The current study sheds light on the issue that academically-at-risk students may be more inclined to participate in such behaviors than their non-at-risk peers, although future research should be conducted in this area.

No matter whether a student is considered to be academically at-risk-or non-at-risk, however, academically entitled student behaviors can be a cause of concern for faculty and staff who truly want to help students navigate their way successfully through college. Furthermore, knowing that academically at-risk students may have a greater likelihood of being academically entitled could help university personnel focus AE-reduction behavior strategies more frequently on academically-at-risk student groups than on non-at-risk students. Additionally, universities may also want to offer AE-related coping strategy workshops for faculty and staff who are unsure of how to work with academically entitled students.

AE and Academic Performance

In the second hypothesis, the researchers predicted for the second hypothesis that there would be a significant correlation between academic performance and AE for both academically at-risk and non-at-risk students. When AE and GPA were correlated for each group separately, no

significant correlation was found; however, when students from each group were combined into one, the researchers did find a small yet significant relationship between these variables. Besides the argument that this result was due to an increase in power associated with an increase in the number of participants, several potential explanations exist as to why this relationship may occur.

AE as a coping strategy used to inflate grades.

The researchers speculate that AE may be a coping strategy used more frequently by academically at-risk students in an attempt to protect their GPA. This strategy would make sense, as students with higher grades would not necessarily need to negotiate grades with their instructors as frequently as academically at-risk students. Academically at-risk students, however, may feel as though they are dangerously close to not getting the grades that they need to graduate or even remain at the university for an extended period of time. Intense negotiations may be effective in persuading professors to give into demands made by such students. As Lippmann et al. (2009) suggested, some instructors may even inflate student grades in an effort to maintain positive teaching evaluations. Thus, AE may be an effective coping strategy for students attempting to get their academic needs of a higher GPA met. This strategy may therefore decrease the GPA gap between academically at-risk and non-at-risk students, making it seem as though there is just a small relationship between AE and GPA when, in fact, it may actually be a larger relationship that is hidden by grade inflation.

Alternatively, one could explain the small yet significant relationship

between AE and GPA as implying that although some students attempt to negotiate higher grades with their instructors, this does not mean that their attempts are effective in increasing their grades substantially. Instructors may witness AE-related opinions and behaviors but refuse to give in to these students' demands. This would indicate that, although persistent, academically entitled students are not necessarily effective in negotiating higher GPA's. If this explanation is true, students may benefit from being informed that this strategy is ineffective. Perhaps being educated on how AE is defined and expressed in the classroom may help some students realize that this behavior is not actually helpful in increasing their GPA.

It is important to consider, however, that a crucial piece to this AE-GPA relationship is that professors are in charge of changing student grades. Knowing whether or not professors agree to increase grades more frequently for academically entitled students could help researchers further explore whether or not there is a significant relationship between AE and GPA in the future.

AE is an identity-protection strategy.

The results of this study indicate that at-risk students are more likely to score higher on AE than non-at-risk students, and thereby, may potentially express AE beliefs in the classroom. Could this potentially be less related to wanting a higher grade and rather, to wanting to "save face" by preserving a more positive identity? This identity preservation strategy may be important not just to protect how the students are perceived by others, but also to themselves. In other words, perhaps AE is really related more

to self-confidence and self-esteem issues and less to one's grades. This idea is supported by the results of previous studies. For example, Greenberger et al. (2008) found that AE was associated with low self-esteem. Falling below important university GPA standards may make academically at-risk students in particular feel embarrassed, distressed, or angry about their own academic performance. Instead of giving in to those negative feelings, however, academically entitled students may attempt to turn either their own attention or their instructors' away from this issue by placing blame elsewhere. This would make sense, as research shows that Millennials in particular feel tremendous pressure to succeed (Twenge, 2006).

Additionally, one may want to consider Kopp et al.'s (2011) discovery that those who score higher on AE are also more likely to have an external locus of control. With external locus of control having been linked to low self-esteem in previous research (Man & Devisse, 1987), it may be the case that those who are more academically-entitled feel that they have less control over their grades. When these grades are threatened, the academically entitled students attribute their low grades to an entity outside of themselves, such as their instructor or university. Thus, AE could be a strategy that appears to be used by individuals solely for grades but actually is a "mask" worn to protect themselves from feeling insecure and powerless.

Obviously, there is more territory that should be explored between the research areas cited above. The discrepancy between Greenberger et al.'s (2008) and Baer and Cheryomukhin's (2011) results as well as the results of the current study indicate that the relationship

between AE, self-esteem, external locus of control, and GPA warrant further exploration.

Limitations

The findings from this study should be interpreted with caution, as there are several important factors to consider when interpreting these results. First, the participants in this study were from just one university, located in the Southern U.S. These students may have had their own particular qualities that make the results less applicable to other college student groups. Another potential limitation is that participants willingly volunteered to take the assessments. This tendency to volunteer may also mean that these students have other qualities that could influence the results in ways that are unknown to the researcher.

Additionally, the data were acquired using self-report procedures. This process may be inherently problematic, as some participants may be unwilling to report their accurate thoughts and feelings. These fears may be due to either not wanting to be perceived as dissatisfied with their lives or to being academically entitled.

Third, course-related credits were offered to the participants by the researcher to take part in this study. These incentives may have attracted students to the study who may not have participated otherwise. Last, even though the AEQ (Kopp et al., 2011) has been shown to be both valid and reliable (Kopp et al., 2011; Kopp & Finney, 2013), this assessment is still a relatively new assessment of AE.

Recommendations for Future Research

The results of this study indicate that academically at-risk students may

have a greater tendency toward expressing academically entitled beliefs than non-at-risk students. This information is valuable in that it can provide a foundation for educators and other university personnel to begin developing education programs that are geared towards reducing AE-behaviors in academically-at-risk student groups. These programs may take the form of either workshops for faculty and staff who are unsure of how to work with academically entitled students, as well as educating college students themselves in how AE is defined and conceptualized as being quite negative.

Second, the results from this study indicate that the relationship between AE and GPA is still nebulous. If AE truly is an effective strategy in negotiating higher GPA's, then it would be beneficial for students to receive education to this effect. Future research should be conducted not only on AE and its relationship to GPA, but also on whether or not instructors actually inflate grades when encountering academically entitled students. Knowing the professor's exact role in AE could provide a missing piece to this puzzle.

Last, a discrepancy was found between Greenberger et al.'s (2008) and Baer and Cheryomukhin's (2011) analysis of the relationship between AE and self-esteem. Are students who score high in AE also more likely to have high self-esteem? Do academically at-risk students score higher on AE assessments because of low self-efficacy levels or an external locus of control? These ambiguities highlight the importance of exploring the relationship between AE, external locus of control, self-esteem, and academic performance in the academically at-risk population.

Conclusion

The current study highlighted the importance of developing a greater understanding of academically entitled students, particularly the academically at-risk population. Knowing that some of these academically at-risk students may be wearing a "mask"—a quality that appears to be AE but could potentially be something deeper—may also illuminate the need to understand these individuals on a deeper level than purely a stereotypical label of being "entitled, low performing students". Future research should be conducted on AE and its relationship to stress coping, external locus of control, self-efficacy, and specific demographic variables. Conducting additional research on these variables could help university faculty and staff understand how to help academically at-risk students in particular reach their full potential.

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