

Motivating disadvantaged students toward the possibility of college

Psychological science has revealed a body of evidence that can help educators motivate disadvantaged students and work to keep them on track through high school and potentially into college.



R&D

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merican society provides opportunities for people to succeed and experience upward mobility, but these opportunities are not equally accessible to everyone. Kids who grow up with more financial resources at home and in their schools find themselves on pathways toward more education, more desirable jobs, and

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Teaching about social mobility during high school provides the opportunity to show students that there are multiple pathways to reaching goals in life.

higher earnings than kids who grow up with fewer financial resources (Baum, Ma, & Payea, 2013). Educators in disadvantaged neighborhoods might find this reality daunting as they face the uphill battle of social and economic forces working against the success of their students (Haskins, Holzer, & Lerman, 2009).

However, growing insight from psychological science can help increase the likelihood that students remain academically motivated despite their often unfair circumstances.

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While students in wealthier homes and neighborhoods regularly interact with adults who went to college and became professionals, students in more disadvantaged homes and neighborhoods often look to television and the media and find images of success that are usually disconnected from education, including entertainers and athletes.

Because these strategies draw from scientifically validated theory and research, they usually involve simple, yet careful, implementation techniques. In other words, when the strategy for motivating students has been studied rigorously, educators can expect it to be more precise and specific and that they won't need to try a range of less useful techniques in their classrooms. Further, by emphasizing that these techniques are supported by research, we hope educators will be more eager and enthusiastic about adopting them rather than other district or school-based initiatives that lack empirical support and are seen as more of an unjustified obligation.

Importantly, the most effective strategy to increase motivation often depends on the age and stage of the student (e.g., Campbell & Ramey, 1994), whether they are in early adolescence, high school, or even beginning college. Sharing certain information with early adolescents can help them view education as worthwhile and accessible. Having conversations with high school students can change a student's outlook about his or her place in society. Students heading to college can benefit from guidance that will help them navigate the new and unfamiliar contexts of college.

Sharing information with early adolescents

Early adolescence is an appropriate starting point to influence student motivation by targeting a young person's idea of who they might become, which is sometimes called their future identity (Destin, 2013; Markus & Nurius, 1986). Educators can shape the types of future identities that students develop, which matters because they have a significant effect on students' everyday motivation in school. For example, a student who has the future identity of becoming an architect finds more meaning in spending time on schoolwork than a student who has the future identity of becoming a professional soccer player. These future identities affect motivation even during early adolescence (Destin & Oyserman, 2010). Students generally imagine different future identities based

on what they see around them. So, while students in wealthier homes and neighborhoods regularly interact with adults who went to college and became professionals, students in more disadvantaged homes and neighborhoods often look to television and the media and find images of success that are usually disconnected from education, including entertainers and athletes (Boon & Lomore, 2001; King & Multon, 1996; Oyserman & Destin, 2010). Despite these social forces that may limit the future identities of some students, educators can distribute two types of information to help expand students' ideas about the future.

The first type of information that is important during early adolescence focuses on unfamiliar opportunities. Specifically, many students may have never seen concrete evidence that education leads to more desirable jobs and higher incomes. In classroom-based field experiments, simply showing students figures of census data indicating that people with more education tend to find greater financial success helped shape students' future identities in ways that encouraged greater attention to schoolwork and even higher grades (Destin & Oyserman, 2010). This information can be distributed in many creative ways that are tied to particular subject matter, such as interpreting bar graphs of national data in math class, reading about the pathway to specific careers in language arts, or even by playing a virtual game that simulates different experiences in life (Domínguez et al., 2013; Kapp, 2012).

The second type of information that is important during early adolescence focuses on unfamiliar resources. Many students realize that education is costly but know little about financial resources available to help overcome those costs. Again in classroom-based field experiments, after students received a basic description of need-based financial aid, an idea of the large amounts of grants available for low-income families, and direction about how to find more information, they showed increased motivation to focus on schoolwork (Destin, 2015; Destin & Oyserman, 2009). Many students learn about resources like need-based financial aid after they've already disengaged from school. The years before high school may seem early for information about opportunities and resources. But gaining an understanding about the tangible benefits of education and the resources that exist to help students has a significant effect on students' school motivation, especially if they come from economically disadvantaged homes where they're less likely to encounter this type of information on their own. All of this information can be distributed in a number of creative ways, including as their own special unit or incorporated into existing curricula.

Motivating conversations during high school

In high school, as students' understanding of the world becomes more complex, educators can motivate students in slightly more complex ways. Considerations of whether social mobility is possible has a significant effect on the motivation and focus on school especially for students from homes and neighborhoods with fewer resources. These thoughts about mobility, called a growth mindset toward status, focus on the belief that a person's status in society is something that can change and that climbing the socioeconomic ladder is possible. A growth mindset toward status is especially important for students from disadvantaged settings because without the belief that social mobility is possible, school can begin to feel useless. Studies show that educators can help high school students develop a growth mindset toward status. In lab studies and field experiments, after students are given evidence that social mobility is possible, they show more school motivation and even earn higher grades (Browman & Destin, 2015). This mindset can be encouraged in many ways, including showing statistics and facilitating a strategic conversation that helps students understand that many people successfully climb the economic ladder. Educators also can connect concepts discussed in their classes to real-world examples of people who experienced mobility along particular career paths, allowing students to ground growth mindsets toward status in their own specific career path and future identity.

Additionally, teaching about social mobility during high school provides the opportunity to show students that there are multiple pathways to reaching goals in life. So, students who aren't headed to college after high school can still see that they can pursue jobs or career-technical education and reach great success in life. Studies suggest that when teachers and counselors inform students about suitable college and noncollege pathways at the appropriate ages, a wider range of students stay focused on school and away from delinquency and dropping out (Bettinger et al., 2012; Compton, Laanan, & Starobin, 2010; Smith, Pender, & Howell, 2013; Stone, Alfeld, & Pearson, 2008; Symonds, Schwartz, & Ferguson, 2011).

Motivating college-bound students

Even for students who do develop future identities that lead them toward higher education and a belief in social mobility, simply reaching college does not ensure success. College can feel foreign and bewildering to students from less privileged backgrounds, which can make it difficult for them to remain motivated and reach their potential. Even as students approach this phase, educators can play a role in equalizing the opportunity for students from all backgrounds to succeed in two ways.

First, the general college climate toward student diversity can either support or impair the motivation of students from underprivileged backgrounds (Browman & Destin, in press). When students see evidence that their university cares about them by prioritizing supports like financial aid and work-study opportunities, they feel more motivated than when they see evidence that their university only cares about wealthier students. So, universities can ensure that students are connected with key individuals and offices that focus on providing such supports even before they set foot on campus. This not only links them to important resources but also sends them the message that the university is dedicated to supporting their success.

Gaining an understanding about the tangible benefits of education and the resources that exist to help students has a significant effect on students' school motivation, especially if they come from economically disadvantaged homes.

Second, higher learning institutions can guide students to embrace their different backgrounds rather than feeling ashamed of them. In an intervention for incoming, first-generation college students, those who had the opportunity to hear how other students used their different backgrounds as a strength to succeed subsequently became more fully engaged in the college experience, which eventually led them to earn higher grades (Stephens, Hamedani, & Destin, 2014; Stephens et al., 2015). Educators can provide many types of opportunities for students to hear about the experiences of other students from backgrounds similar to their own as they transitioned into college. For example, high schools and even elementary schools can reach out to alumni to speak with students about these experiences from an insider perspective. This will help new students feel prepared for challenges at college in general or even learn about experiences that others have had at the same institution that they will attend.

Conclusion

The strategies that we have described draw from research focused on increasing school motivation for students who face unique challenges because of their economic background. Although their experiences will always differ from students from more privileged backgrounds, small steps can increase the likelihood that they remain focused on education as a pathway to their future and feel consistently motivated to pursue their goals.



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