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How writing down life goals helps students boost their semester grades

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When Dominique Morisano told colleagues at McGill University in Montreal that she thought she could improve grades by having students write out life goals, they laughed.

"They said it was not theoretical," Morisano said of presenting her proposal to her Ph.D. committee as a grad student. That is, there was no basis to think it would work or why.

Morisano studied 85 struggling first-year students at McGill, asking half of them to do a writing project on past experiences or ideas, while the others wrote out detailed life goals, anticipating challenges and possible solutions.

Four months later, the goal group had significantly improved their GPAs. In the semester after the experiment, eight students, or one-fifth, of the control group dropped below full-time enrollment.

"I didn't realize it was a radical concept," Morisano said. "I had a gut feeling that if struggling students wrote out a blueprint of their ideal future, it would give them a sense of purpose, and impact many aspects of their lives, including academic achievement, for the better."

Twenty-five percent of students who enroll in four-year universities never finish. And those who struggle are disproportionally ethnic and racial minorities from low-income families, usually first-generation college students.

Efforts to help at-risk first-generation college students through their first year of college and on to graduation has consumed sizeable resources and attention at the highest levels.

Progress has been made, with US News reporting that in 2013 just over 50 percent of underrepresented minorities (which excludes Asians) who started at public universities graduated on time, compared to 64 percent of white students — up from 59 percent in 2003, but with graduation rates of both groups increasing during that decade the gap did not narrow.

Morisano, who now splits time between teaching psychology at the University of Toronto and a clinical psychology practice, finds herself in the midst of several intriguing strands of research that, taken together, suggest that asking students to think carefully about their life goals may help them improve their grades and finish college. And, as an added bonus, it may also improve their health.

A huge discovery

Morisano's approach centered not just on setting goals, but also on "elaborating and reflecting" on them. Students were given eight steps to complete, including "free writing about their ideal future self and life," extracting and labeling their goals from this narrative, ranking the goals, considering implications for themselves and others, and laying out strategies to overcome likely obstacles.

It worked. In a random-assignment study, grades shot up 30 percent the next semester for the goal-setting group. And where 20 percent of the control dropped out or fell below full-time enrollment, none of the goal-setting group did.

All of the students in Morisano's study were at-risk of dropping out of McGill, one of the most competitive university's in Canada, Morisano said.

"It's a huge discovery," Edwin Locke said of Morisano's discovery. An organizational psychologist and emeritus business professor at the University of Maryland, Locke is himself widely viewed as the father of goal-setting research.

"One surprising result of this study," Locke said, "was that those who set academic goals did not actually do better academically than those who set other kinds of goals."

Conventional goal-setting theory, as developed over the past 40 years, had always assumed that the goal had to be specifically tailored to the outcome you wanted. The theory held that if you wanted better grades, then you set a specific goal to get better grades, Locke said.

But this research in Toronto and the Netherlands, Locke said, suggests that telling a detailed story about the kind of life and the hurdles you expect to cross can have concrete payoffs along the way.

"This very act of mental processing seems to have benefited many aspects of the subjects' lives," Locke said, "including staying in school, getting their degree, and improving self-esteem and social confidence."

But the key, the piece that seems to disrupt current goal-setting theory, is that the writer can get proven benefits in one part of life, such as grades, from setting goals for other aspects of life, such as travel or family relationships.

Of course, Morisano knows why her professors were skeptical: "Why would saying you want to learn French or become a better cook or improve your relationship with your mother help improve your academic grades?"

Scaling up

Shortly after Morisano's research was published, Michaela Schippers, a management professor at the Rotterdam School of Management, set out to replicate Morisano's work.

Schippers' program is comprised of two phases with a couple of hours set aside for each phase. Students are asked about what they want to learn, who they admire and traits they admire. They also paint a verbal picture of where and who they want to be in five years.

Students in the program write an average of 3,000 words, and they have found that those who write the most gain the most benefit.

A third phase involves the student getting a photo taken and attaching an "ideal self" statement to the photo.

Schippers had intended to do an adaptation of Morisano's study. But her school's administration wanted to go all out. So they launched the program with all incoming students, and then compared the results to the previous year's class.

In the first year of the program, the overall retention rate, Schippers said, went from 50 percent to 67 percent. The study showed the greatest impact on male students and non-Western minorities. The gender gap closed by 98 percent and the ethnicity gap by 38 percent. Ethnic minority males earned 44 percent more credits, and retention for this group increased 54 percent.

Now helping implement the program at a university in Amsterdam, with 1,000 incoming students, Schippers is very optimistic about where this might go.

“It’s not just grades and retention,” she said. ”Students are also more motivated and feel better about themselves. They are less anxious, and begin making choices among goals.”

Best future selves

When Morisano began sketching out her research, she took a close look at the work of Laura King, now a psychology professor at the University of Missouri. But King’s first job was at

Southern Methodist University, where she was a colleague of James Pennebaker, the godfather of expressive writing.

Expressive writing is a form of therapy, usually reserved for those who need help coming to grips with traumatic experiences. Usually, the subjects are asked to dredge up painful events and get them out on paper, the notion being that sunlight is a disinfectant.

Again, no one was sure why it worked, but over 40 studies had shown that it did. The process may be traumatic, but the results were undeniable.

"They would come out of the writing sessions crying and exhausted, and we were thinking this was just tough therapy," King said. "We thought they had to suffer."

But just as Morisano wondered if goal setting could be broken apart from narrow objectives, King began to wonder: Could the results be achieved by asking students to look forward to a positive future rather than tearing scabs off a painful past?

In King's most widely noted study, she had some subjects write about traumatic past experiences while others wrote about their "best possible future self." A third control group wrote about a non-emotional topic.

Not surprisingly, King's study found that the life goals groups experienced less stress than the trauma group. But the kicker came five months later, when she found that both groups had significantly less illness, compared to controls who did neither. Simply put, those who focused on the future rather than unpacking the past got all of the gain without the pain.

It was King's study that got Morisano thinking about finding an intersection between expressive writing and goal setting.

The pep talk

No one knows for sure how all of this works. But a number of researchers are exploring whether there is significant power in the coherence and specificity of the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves.

Timothy Wilson, whose book "Redirect: Changing the Stories We Live By," launched in paperback this month, has spent 30 years researching the role of personal narratives and "story editing" on academic and other life outcomes.

"Much of our behavior is driven by the stories we tell ourselves," Wilson said, "and if we really want to help people we have to get in and edit those stories."

Wilson is not surprised to see valuable work centering on the first year of college. The first year of college is a "narrative fork in the road," Wilson says.

Back in 1982, Wilson did a study that took struggling college freshman and gave them a 30-minute pep talk. Most college freshmen struggle, the students in the study were told, and most significantly improve their grades in subsequent years. They then showed a video of upperclassmen telling their own similar stories of struggling and overcoming.

Wilson found that students who got this intervention were much less likely to leave college by the end of their sophomore year. They also improved their GPA dramatically compared to the control group and did much better on sample questions from the Graduate Record Exam.

Feelings of belonging

Wilson points to a more recent study by Greg Walton, a psychology professor at Stanford, which is now being replicated at several other universities.

Students in the experiment were shown a series of reflections by older students to the effect that they had struggled with feeling like they belonged, but that those fears and problems diminished over time.

The study had no effect on white students. But the African-American participants, whom the researchers expected might have questioned their belonging in the face of adversity, ended up with significantly better GPAs three years later and better health.

The researchers suggest that by helping students see themselves into the future, in the voices of others like them, day-to-day adversity came to be seen as part of life rather than a symptom of un-belonging.

"The intervention thus planted a change in social perception that, it appears, accompanied students long after the intervention ended to affect their performance in college," the authors noted.

Wilson notes the strong tie between his research at Virginia and Walton's study. "I was focused on why I am doing well or not academically, they focused on feelings of belonging at the university."

A need for rigor

"We absolutely have to test any such program rigorously," said Wilson, who insists that the "gold standard" of random assignment is the only way to go. Most programs would not be difficult to study with rigor. "Too often, we rely on common sense."

Wilson's favorite example of failed common sense is the Scared Straight Program, which was supposed to deter kids from drug use but, research showed, simply made it more glamorous. "And yet, because it kind of makes sense that we should scare kids, people still use it."

Laura King agrees. Even though she has consistently found positive results on her expressive writing research, she has not been able to find the key causal variables. She's actually set her work aside and placed 17 studies in a filing cabinet because she cannot figure out *how* and *why* the interventions made lives better.

Which is why, to this day, the research frustrates King. If she doesn't know what works and why, she can't make any progress.

A layman might say, "Well, if it works, then just do it." But King can't see it that way. If she doesn't understand how and why it works, she knows she could be wasting time or even causing collateral damage.

In the meantime, researchers are pushing forward on all fronts. The Stanford intervention is being tested now at multiple campuses. Schippers continues to expand her reach in the Netherlands, and she and Morisano have teamed up with Cheryl Travers, a researcher in England, doing similar work.

Morisano understands the concern with getting the science right. She is also a stickler for random controlled studies, and she has concerns about layering unproven concepts into programs that make them unwieldy and costly.

But she also sees interventions that are known to work, and students who badly need them. If researchers always waited to offer programs until the the social science was perfectly understood, "it would take a hundred years."

"If a student spends two hours thinking and writing about their future," Morisano asks, "is there any damage done? I can't imagine what the collateral damage could be from that. I can't imagine what the waste in time could be from that."

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