Academic Achievement and Social Involvement as Predictors of Life Satisfaction Among College Students

The present study examined academic achievement and social involvement as predictors of undergraduates’ life satisfaction. 103 participants completed a survey that assessed life satisfaction, academic achievement, and different types of social involvement. The results of a multiple regression indicated that both social involvement and academic achievement accounted for unique variance ($R^2 = .29$) in the outcome variable of life satisfaction. In addition, the distinction between structured and unstructured social involvement was examined, and I found that unstructured involvement had a much stronger relationship with life satisfaction. These results indicate that both social involvement and academic achievement are important predictors of undergraduate life satisfaction.

Just as the “keys” to happiness have been sought after from the beginning of intellectual and enlightened thought, the determinants of life satisfaction have been equally pursued. Among those who strive for this invaluable information are academic institutions. Because graduation rates have been found to be correlated with student life satisfaction (Graunke & Shelly, 2005), the topic is important to universities throughout the United States and abroad. With better knowledge of how these factors contribute to life satisfaction in college, education systems may theoretically be altered to improve the likelihood of high satisfaction levels and subsequent degree attainment of students.

Academic Achievement and Satisfaction

Previous research has found that academic achievement is positively correlated with overall life satisfaction. Chow (2004) recently asked undergraduates about their satisfaction with life and assessed nine possible predictors, including grade point average, self image, self-esteem, sex, and living conditions. He established that grade point average was a predictor of life satisfaction, along with socio-economic status, self-esteem, and relationships with a significant other. Chow concluded that the students with higher GPAs tended to demonstrate a higher level of life satisfaction.

Individual grades received on a given day, in addition to cumulative GPA, have also been shown to predict satisfaction. By examining the relationship between academic achievement as indicated by grades, self-worth, and self-esteem, Crocker, Karpinski, Quinn and Chase (2003) found that self-esteem was contingent on the reception of good and bad grades. On days in which students received poor grades, they had much lower self-esteem than on a baseline day. Accordingly, a day during which a good grade was received had a significant change in satisfaction. The authors concluded that students’ self-esteem was related to grades (Crocker, et al. 2005). Diener and Diener (1995) found that across many countries, college students’ life satisfaction was closely related to self-esteem. From this research, one can assume that through self-
esteem, perceived academic achievement is related to life-satisfaction.

To further emphasize the relationship between achievement and satisfaction, House (1992) performed a study in which he compared self-perception of academic ability, drive to achieve, and self confidence to withdrawal rates in college. Using a sample of 2,544 participants from a large American university, he found that the self-concept of academic ability was the “single most significant predictor” (House, p. 127) of withdrawal from the university, particularly for men (House, 1992). Crocker et al. (2003) also found that grades affected academic self-concept, making House’s findings applicable to the study of the influence of academic achievement. Therefore, grades could have a relationship with retention rates through affecting a student’s academic self-concept, indicating the importance of academic achievement.

These findings indicate that academic achievement, as demonstrated through grades, GPA, and academic self-concept, is a consistent predictor of life satisfaction. However, it seems improbable that a student who is “wholly consumed in academic performance” will attain the highest levels of life satisfaction, despite his or her level of success (Rode, Mooney, Near, Baldwin, Bommer & Robert, 2005). Rode et al. (2005) found that other factors, such as family relations, are important to life satisfaction, indicating that isolating oneself to focus solely on academics is actually detrimental. Instead, one should be become involved in other activities as well.

**Social Involvement and Satisfaction**

To determine what other variables contribute to satisfaction, other factors have been examined, including socioeconomic status, perceived health, race, age, and social participation. Clemente and Sauer (2001) examined life satisfaction as a result of multiple factors, focusing on the independent effects of each contributor while controlling for the others. They found that social participation, as indicated by involvement with political and religious activities, was directly and positively related to life satisfaction, as were health and SES. However, neither GPA nor perceived academic achievement were assessed.

The current study seeks to investigate the relationship between social participation and life satisfaction further, with the expansion hypothesis of life involvement as a theoretical context. According to this theory (Kessler & McRae, 1981), the more involved in life activities a person is, the more he or she is satisfied with his or her life overall.

Bailey and Christy (1998) surveyed 243 undergraduates to assess involvement and life satisfaction. After grouping the students into low, medium, and high life satisfaction groups, the authors addressed the students’ levels of involvement, including time pressures, stress, responsibilities, and life roles. As they proposed, college students’ life satisfaction rating was related to their levels of involvement. Despite having more time constraints and more demanding lifestyles as a result of heightened social involvement, their research showed that students within the high-involvement category did not suffer increased stress or anxiety.

Social participation can be divided into two components: structured extracurricular activities (SEAs) and unstructured social interaction. Defined as activities that are “physically or mentally stimulating... and contain some structural parameters” (Gilman, Meyers & Perez, 2004, p. 31), SEAs include, but are not limited to, clubs, sports, volunteer organizations, and structured Greek life activities on college campuses. Gilman (2001) found that SEA involvement had a significant relationship with overall life satisfaction. Even when controlling for social interest, high school students in the “high SEA” group (those participating in at least seven SEAs) had higher ratings of life satisfaction than those of the medium and low SEA involvement categories. Maton (1990) also reported a significant positive relationship between life satisfaction and SEA involvement. Whether a result of identification with the school, more structured role modeling, or another factor, SEAs have shown consistent relationships with life and school satisfaction.

However, the study of SEAs does not address social involvement at an unstructured level. Interpersonal interaction and activity should also be included in social participation, as not all socialization is involved with organized activity within associations. Social involvement through casual participation has been shown to be related to life satisfaction as well. For example, Bailey and Miller (1998) found that interaction in personal relationships was related to high levels of life satisfaction.

Similarly, research focused upon social involvement through social networking (i.e. participating in a group drawn together by interest, relation, or ideals) has demonstrated that uninvolved adolescents had a greater chance of negative outcomes, including heightened levels of depression and increased likelihood of dropping out (Mazza & Eggert, 2001). Therefore, it can be concluded that social involvement within and outside of SEAs is related to life satisfaction among college students.

It seems then that both academic achievement and social involvement are important predictors of life satisfaction. However, it has yet to be examined whether both are independently related to levels of
satisfaction. Therefore, in addition to examining the main effects of academic achievement and social participation as predictors, the current study also considers the possibility that both factors may be necessary for the highest levels of satisfaction. A student may score highly in academic achievement but lack any meaningful social activity, just as another may enjoy much social participation and perform poorly in classes; in both of these situations, the student may not score highly in life satisfaction.

Method

Participants

The current study sampled 103 undergraduate students from Clemson University, a mid-sized southeastern university. The sample was fairly equal in terms of gender (42.7% male, 53.4% female) and enrollment year (11.7% freshmen, 23.7% sophomores, 35% junior, and 25.3% senior). Just under 4% of the sample did not complete the demographics section. Ethnicities were not as evenly distributed, with 85.4% of the sample reporting themselves as white, 7.8% as African American, and 1% as “other”. 5.8% of the sample did not select an ethnicity.

Materials

Life Satisfaction. The Diener Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS) (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985) was used to measure life satisfaction while in college. This highly popular five item measure is based on a seven point Likert scale (1= strongly disagree to 7= strongly disagree). Thus, a participant can score as low as five and as high as 35. Sample items include “in most ways my life is close to my ideal” and “I am satisfied with my life.” Although none of the items are negatively worded, the Diener scale maintains very high reliability and validity. The test-retest reliability yielded a correlation coefficient of .87 after two months, and each scale had good internal consistency, from .61 to .81 (Diener et al., 1985). For this study, I obtained in a Cronbach alpha score of .84.

Academic Achievement. The academic achievement scale (Appendix A) used in this study was created by the researcher to ascertain the level of success attained by each student. Also on a seven-point Likert Scale, the items measured academic success in general as well as in relation to other students. For example, a sample item “I typically get better than average grades in class” was included. An open-ended request for GPA was also included. Internal consistency for the self-report measure of academic achievement was .91. GPA and the academic achievement items were standardized and then combined into a single measure

Social Involvement. The measure for social involvement was also generated by the researcher based on past research and the Chapin Social Participation Scale (Chapin, 1939). The Chapin Social Participation scale assesses participation through number of organization memberships, attendance, financial contributions, membership on committees, and offices held. Each of these aspects was assigned a specific weight, from one to five, in the order given above. Although the scale reflects a reliability coefficient of .89 (Bach, 1961), it may not be fully applicable to college students, based on the financial constraints of many students that prevent them from participating at certain levels within an organization (e.g., cannot attend business meetings). Consistent with previous research discussed above, the items reflect both SEA involvement (e.g., “I actively participate in clubs, teams, or other structured organizations) and casual social participation (e.g. “I actively participate in clubs or teams” and “I don’t devote much time to social activities”). The scale consisted of both positively and negatively worded items (Appendix B). Negatively worded statements were reverse scored.

Items were rated using a seven point Likert scale. Higher total scores indicate high social involvement, whereas lower scores represent low involvement. In addition, the measure included two questions addressing the number of hours of structured (teams, etc) versus unstructured social involvement, which were standardized along with the rated items to create measures for structured and unstructured involvement within total social involvement. The items comprising the unstructured and structured social involvement were measured using different response formats (i.e. hours versus a 1-7 Likert scale). Therefore, each item was standardized prior to the formation of separate sub-scales. Overall total social involvement had an internal consistency of .77.

Procedure

Participants were approached in several ways. One method was through classes that mandate attendance, so that the convenience sample is not simply composed of those students who actively go to class and are therefore more likely to have higher academic achievement. The classes used for participant selection were business writing classes; a class that is mandatory for every student to graduate Clemson. Students were also contacted at random locations (e.g. the dining hall).

To avoid the question order effect of academic achievement and social involvement priming life satisfaction, Diener’s Satisfaction with Life Scale was placed first among the three constructs to assess each
participant’s overall satisfaction with life in college. The scale for academic achievement, which requested information on GPA and perceived academic success, was second. The social involvement scale was placed third, which evaluated each student’s social participation, including statements about both structured and unstructured activities. A demographics section was included at the end of the survey, which included enrollment year, age, gender, and ethnicity. Once they completed the survey, which took approximately ten minutes, the participants were debriefed.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics and Correlations**

The average mean for life satisfaction among the Clemson undergraduate participants was 5.29 out of a seven point scale. As presented in Table 1, the means for academic achievement and social interaction were 5.52 and 5.34 respectively, also out of a seven point scale. These means indicate that Clemson students in general seem to be satisfied with their lives, with high academic achievement and social involvement. Each mean was above a score of 5 in a 1-7 scale. The correlations among the measured variable are presented in Table 2. Both academic achievement ($r = .37$, $p < .001$) and social interaction ($r = .34$, $p < .001$) were positively correlated with life satisfaction, as shown in Table 2.

**Academic Achievement and Social Interaction as Predictors of Life Satisfaction**

Analysis by multiple regression indicated strong main effects for both academic achievement and social involvement. As Table 3 indicates, both were highly significant ($p = .003$ academic achievement, $p < .001$ social involvement); they accounted for unique variance in life satisfaction. The multiple correlation of both predictors with the outcome was .45 ($p < .001$). The variables combined accounted for 23.9% of the variance in life satisfaction. However, there was no evidence of an interaction between academic achievement and social involvement with life satisfaction ($p = .43$).

**Structured versus Unstructured Social Activities as Predictors of Life Satisfaction**

In order to assess whether involvement in unstructured or structured activities was a more important predictor of life satisfaction, I created two new variables. After standardizing the measures of hours and ratings, separate indexes of unstructured and structured social involvement were created. Participants were asked to rate how many hours they participated in structured and unstructured activities, separately (2 hours, 2-4 hours, 4-6 hours, more than 6 hours). To assess the difference between these aspects of social involvement, statistical analysis was conducted using multiple regression. The results indicated that academic achievement and social interaction were significant predictors of life satisfaction. The structured social involvement was also a significant predictor, while unstructured social involvement was not.

**TABLE 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>St. Dev.</th>
<th>N</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>5.2913</td>
<td>1.05227</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Achievement</td>
<td>5.5243</td>
<td>1.10759</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Involvement</td>
<td>5.343</td>
<td>0.94852</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Social Total</th>
<th>Unstructured SI</th>
<th>Structured SI</th>
<th>Academic Achievement</th>
<th>Life Satisfaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social Total</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstructured SI</td>
<td>.922**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structured SI</td>
<td>.559**</td>
<td>.139</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Achievement</td>
<td>.257**</td>
<td>.222*</td>
<td>.145</td>
<td>1.00</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life Satisfaction</td>
<td>.340**</td>
<td>.338**</td>
<td>.109</td>
<td>.346**</td>
<td>1.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* significant at the .05 level (2-tailed)

** significant at the .01 level (2-tailed)
Involvement, two new variables were created: unstructured hours were combined with items that assessed unstructured activity involvement, and structured hours were combined with items that addressed clubs, teams, and other structured social activities. Sample items include “I actively participate in clubs, teams, or other structured organizations”. By standardizing the items, the hours and the Likert items could be combined into the two variables of structured and unstructured involvement, both of which had acceptable Cronbach’s Alphas (.79 unstructured, .94 structured). GPA was also standardized with perceived academic achievement, as assessed by the Likert scale items.

Unstructured social involvement was also significantly positively correlated with life satisfaction, at .41 ($p < .001$). The correlation of structured social involvement and life satisfaction was not significant, at .109 ($p = .271$).

**Discussion**

Consistent with previous research, perceived academic achievement had a strong, positive correlation with life satisfaction. The results support Chow’s 2004 study that academic success is strongly correlated with life satisfaction. The data are also consistent with House (1992), who found that self-perception of academic ability, instead of letter grades or GPA, was the best predictor of college dropout rates. Overall, the current study lends additional support to the existing studies that academic achievement has a strong relationship with life satisfaction among students, both by GPA and perceived achievement.

The results for social involvement were also in agreement with past research. As Clemente and Sauer (2001) found, social participation was positively correlated with life satisfaction as well ($r = .34$). This supports Kessler and McRae’s expansion hypothesis of life involvement that the more socially involved a person is, the more satisfied he or she is with life overall.

Interestingly, however, the current study found that unstructured social activity had a stronger relationship with life satisfaction than structured social activity. This is especially intriguing because in previous studies of SEA involvement and life satisfaction, unstructured activity involvement was not assessed for comparison with SEA involvement (Gilman, 2001). Instead, SEA involvement was thought to be the main link to life satisfaction in students.

Unlike past research that examined social involvement and academic achievement in isolation, the present study found that both academic achievement and social involvement were significant unique predictors of life satisfaction. It seems that both are important predictors of satisfaction among college undergraduates, as together they accounted for 20.1% of variance in life satisfaction.

The lack of evidence of an interaction indicates that the hypothesis of a synergetic effect was not supported. While both academic achievement and social involvement are correlated with life satisfaction, there was little support for the hypothesis that very high levels of both would be necessary for especially high levels of life satisfaction.

**Limitations**

Several limitations with the current study exist that should be acknowledged and kept in mind while interpreting its results. Although the sample was fairly representative of Clemson’s undergraduate population in terms of gender, it was not as equal in other aspects. The sample was composed of mainly juniors.
most likely as a result of the classes that were chosen to participate with the study. In addition, the mean for academic achievement was high (5.52); this may also be due to the classes chosen, rather than an actual representation of the student body.

Future studies should vary methods of participant selection, perhaps approaching students solely in open areas around campus instead of classrooms, which may yield a less accurate representation.

The current study found a much stronger relationship with unstructured social involvement with life satisfaction than structured (SEA) social involvement with life satisfaction. However, only two items were combined for the SEA involvement, whereas six were for unstructured, so there is a chance that some SEA involvement was included within the unstructured assessment. However, it is worth noting the alpha level was higher for the structured social activities. Future research could examine the relationship between these variables more closely.

In summary, these results support the previous research that examined either academic success or social interaction as predictors of life satisfaction. In addition, by assessing social involvement and academic achievement in the same study, there is support for the hypothesis that both variables are uniquely significant and important predictors of college students’ life satisfaction.

References

FACTORS OF LIFE SATISFACTION  Powers

APPENDIX A

Academic Achievement

Cumulative GPA: __________

1. I typically get better than average grades in my classes.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Slightly Agree Agree Strongly Agree

2. I often do not get high marks.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Slightly Agree Agree Strongly Agree

3. On the whole, I am successful in class.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Slightly Agree Agree Strongly Agree

4. I perform well in academics.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Slightly Agree Agree Strongly Agree

5. I usually receive less than average grades on tests.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Strongly Disagree Disagree Neither Agree nor Disagree Slightly Agree Agree Strongly Agree
APPENDIX B

Social Involvement

1. Outside of class, I spend much of my time with friends.

   1 Strongly Disagree  2 Disagree  3 Slightly Disagree  4 Neither Agree nor Disagree  5 Slightly Agree  6 Agree  7 Strongly Agree

2. I often take part in group activities.

   1 Strongly Disagree  2 Disagree  3 Slightly Disagree  4 Neither Agree nor Disagree  5 Slightly Agree  6 Agree  7 Strongly Agree

3. I spend much of my time alone.

   1 Strongly Disagree  2 Disagree  3 Slightly Disagree  4 Neither Agree nor Disagree  5 Slightly Agree  6 Agree  7 Strongly Agree

4. I actively participate in clubs, teams or other structured organizations.

   1 Strongly Disagree  2 Disagree  3 Slightly Disagree  4 Neither Agree nor Disagree  5 Slightly Agree  6 Agree  7 Strongly Agree

5. I consider myself very socially active.

   1 Strongly Disagree  2 Disagree  3 Slightly Disagree  4 Neither Agree nor Disagree  5 Slightly Agree  6 Agree  7 Strongly Agree

6. I don’t devote much time to social activities.

   1 Strongly Disagree  2 Disagree  3 Slightly Disagree  4 Neither Agree nor Disagree  5 Slightly Agree  6 Agree  7 Strongly Agree

7. Estimated number of hours spent in structured organizations (clubs, teams, sports, Greek chapter meetings, committee meetings, et cetera) per week

   Less than 2 hours  2-4 hours  4-6 hours  More than 6 hours

8. Estimated number of hours spent in casual social activities (going out with friends, actively socializing, et cetera) per week:

   Less than 2 hours  2-4 hours  4-6 hours  More than 6 hours