BECOMING A SUCCESSFUL STUDENT: KEY FACTORS OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

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Abstract

This paper examines how university students can develop habits that support academic achievement over time. It draws on selected research on academic performance, personality, goal setting, motivation, self-efficacy, and learning strategies. The discussion uses self-regulated learning as an organizing framework, linking the planning of study to the monitoring and adjustment of learning. The paper considers how students can allocate time realistically, set goals that guide practice, and use feedback to identify gaps in understanding. It distinguishes the relatively strong evidence for practice testing and distributed practice from the more limited conclusions that can be drawn from correlations between personal characteristics and grades. Examples from foreign language courses illustrate how students can put these principles into practice.

Keywords: academic achievement, self-regulated learning, time management, goal setting, motivation, self-efficacy, retrieval practice, critical thinking.

Introduction

Academic achievement at university includes meeting course requirements,

developing subject knowledge, and applying that knowledge to unfamiliar tasks. Grades provide one indication of achievement. Progress can also be seen when students explain a difficult concept independently, revise an argument in response to feedback, or apply a language rule accurately in a new context. Such outcomes require students to make decisions about how to study, how to evaluate their understanding, and when to seek help.

Richardson et al. [1] reviewed a range of factors associated with university grade point average, including prior achievement, academic self-efficacy, grade goals, and effort regulation. Poropat [2] found an association between conscientiousness and academic performance across educational settings. These findings help explain why students with similar prior knowledge may approach academic tasks differently. They also distinguish relatively stable individual differences from practices that students can adjust, such as how they organize their work or respond to feedback.

This paper asks how university students can translate research on academic achievement into daily study decisions. It argues that self-regulation connects the main factors discussed here. Time management creates opportunities for practice, goals give practice direction, and evidence of performance helps students decide what to change.

Approach and Scope

The paper presents a narrative discussion of seven selected sources, including meta-analyses, theoretical works, a prospective study of time management, and a review of learning techniques. Evidence about grades is interpreted separately from evidence about retention or task performance. Associations with GPA can identify patterns across students, while studies of learning techniques can help evaluate what happens when students change how they practice. The examples apply these ideas to university coursework, particularly foreign language learning.

Time Management and Effort Regulation

Effective scheduling begins by estimating the work a task requires. An essay involves reading, outlining, drafting, and revision, each of which can be assigned a separate deadline. A weekly plan can reserve focused study time for demanding work, place shorter tasks between classes, and leave room for delays. For students balancing employment or family responsibilities, shorter recurring sessions may be easier to sustain than a single long session.

Britton and Tesser [3] used a time-management questionnaire to examine whether students' reported practices predicted later college grades. Their findings support an association between some planning practices and subsequent achievement. The study design leaves open whether changing a specific planning habit would improve grades for every student. Its practical implication is to treat a schedule as a tool that can be tested and revised. At the end of a week, students can compare what they planned with what they completed and adjust the time allocated to tasks that consistently run over.

Procrastination can also be addressed at the level of the task. A broad instruction such as "work on the essay" leaves the first step unclear. "Read the two assigned articles and write one sentence stating each author's main claim" gives the student a concrete starting point and a result to check before the next session.

Goal Setting, Motivation, and Self-Efficacy

Specific goals make it easier for students to direct their attention and evaluate progress. Locke and Latham [4] emphasize the value of challenging goals under conditions that include commitment, appropriate ability, and feedback. When a skill is new, a learning goal can guide practice more directly than a target grade. For instance, a student who wants to improve academic speaking can record a two-minute summary and check whether it contains a clear main claim, two supporting details, and transitions. A second recording provides evidence of improvement.

Ryan and Deci [5] describe intrinsic motivation as engagement arising from interest or enjoyment. Their account also explains how students can persist in an activity they find difficult or uninteresting when they value its purpose. A student may dislike editing citations while recognizing that accurate attribution makes academic arguments traceable. Giving students a choice of topic, explaining the purpose of a task, and providing usable feedback can help them see value in the work.

Self-efficacy concerns students' beliefs about their capacity to perform a particular task [6]. It can be strengthened through evidence of progress. For example, a student who finds authentic English recordings difficult can begin with short clips, identify main ideas with transcript support, and gradually move toward longer recordings with fewer prompts. Specific feedback helps the student decide which listening strategy to keep and which skill needs further practice.

Study Strategies and Critical Thinking

Dunlosky et al. [7] rated practice testing and distributed practice highly across a range of learning conditions. Practice testing requires learners to retrieve information from memory. In a vocabulary lesson, students can close their notes, recall a word and its meaning, use it in a sentence, and then check their response. The check matters because it reveals errors that may feel familiar during rereading and gives students an opportunity to correct them.

Distributed practice separates review into multiple sessions. A student preparing for a phonetics examination might recall examples of a sound contrast on Monday, transcribe new examples on Wednesday, and explain the distinction aloud on Friday. Dunlosky et al. [7] gave summarization and rereading lower overall utility ratings. These activities can still support preparation when they serve a defined purpose. A student might reread a passage to resolve a specific misunderstanding exposed by a self-test.

Critical thinking extends study beyond recall. When comparing two readings, students can identify each author's claim, distinguish examples from evidence, and assess whether the evidence supports the conclusion. In an academic writing course, they might mark where their own paragraph makes a general claim, then check whether the cited study examined the same population or context. This practice links critical reading to the quality of the student's own argument.

Feedback, Setbacks, and Continuous Improvement

An unsuccessful attempt can provide useful information when students examine the specific cause of an error. A weak essay score might reflect an unclear thesis, insufficient evidence, or difficulty organizing paragraphs. Each diagnosis suggests a different response. A student who receives feedback about weak evidence could revise one paragraph by adding a relevant source and explaining how it supports the claim, then ask the instructor whether the link is clear.

Students can use a simple cycle of planning, practice, and reflection. Before a study session, they select a task and define an observable result. During the session, they record what they can do independently and where they need support. Afterward, they use errors, feedback, or a short self-test to plan the next step. Help-seeking fits within this cycle. A question such as "Does this example actually support my claim?" gives an instructor or peer a specific point to address.

Conclusion

University students can make academic progress more manageable by connecting their goals, study time, practice, and feedback. Realistic plans protect opportunities for sustained effort, while specific goals make progress easier to evaluate. Retrieval practice and distributed review help students test what they remember, and critical analysis helps them apply knowledge to new problems. When an approach falls short, students can examine their work, identify a specific difficulty, and revise their

plan. Over time, this process supports both academic achievement and the ability to learn independently.

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