Academic Achievement in Argentinean College Students: Major Findings in Psychological Assessment

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Abstract : In the last decade, academic achievement in higher education has become a topic of agenda in Argentina, regarding the high figures of adjustment problems, academic failure and dropout, and the low graduation rates in the context of massive classes and traditional teaching methods. Psychological variables, such as perceived social support, academic motivation and learning styles and strategies have much to offer since their measurement by tests allows a proper diagnose of their influence on academic achievement. Framed in a major research, several studies analysed multiple samples, totalizing 5135 students attending Argentinean public universities. The first goal was aimed at the identification of statistically significant differences in psychological variables -perceived social support, learning styles, learning strategies, and academic motivation- by age, gender, and degree of academic advance (freshmen versus sophomores). Thus, an inferential group differences study for each psychological dependent variable was developed by means of student's T tests, given the features of data distribution. The second goal, aimed at examining associations between the four psychological variables on the one hand, and academic achievement on the other, was responded by correlational studies, calculating Pearson's coefficients, employing grades as the quantitative indicator of academic achievement. The positive and significant results that were obtained led to the formulation of different predictive models of academic achievement which had to be tested in terms of adjustment and predictive power. These models took the four psychological variables above mentioned as predictors, using regression equations, examining predictors individually, in groups of two, and together, analysing indirect effects as well, and adding the degree of academic advance and gender, which had shown their importance within the first goal's findings. The most relevant results were: first, gender showed no influence on any dependent variable. Second, only good achievers perceived high social support from teachers, and male students were prone to perceive less social support. Third, freshmen exhibited a pragmatic learning style, preferring unstructured environments, the use of examples and simultaneous-visual processing in learning, whereas sophomores manifest an assimilative learning style, choosing sequential and analytic processing modes. Despite these features, freshmen have to deal with abstract contents and sophomores, with practical learning situations due to study programs in force. Fifth, no differences in academic motivation were found between freshmen and sophomores. However, the latter employ a higher number of more efficient learning strategies. Sixth, freshmen low achievers lack intrinsic motivation. Seventh, models testing showed that social support, learning styles and academic motivation influence learning strategies, which affect academic achievement in freshmen, particularly males; only learning styles influence achievement in sophomores of both genders with direct effects. These findings led to conclude that educational psychologists, education specialists, teachers, and universities must plan urgent and major changes. These must be applied in renewed and better study programs, syllabi and classes, as well as tutoring and training systems. Such developments should be targeted to the support and empowerment of students in their academic pathways, and therefore to the upgrade of learning quality, especially in the case of freshmen, male freshmen, and low achievers.
Keywords : academic achievement, academic motivation, coping, learning strategies, learning styles, perceived social support