

## Motivating College Students: Challenges, Consequences, and Remedies

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**Abstract:** Academic motivation can work both ways. It inspires students as well as instructors at all levels of learning. However, this study gears toward motivation at the college level. When instructors cannot accomplish learning outcomes and observe students dropping the course, come late, miss lectures, and even scheduled tests or exams, these reveal serious problems or challenges. These challenges as well lead to undesired consequences. If this recurs very often, it becomes a phenomenon that needs immediate remedies or solutions. Previous research has focused on many aspects of motivation, theories, definition. Research has reached empirical results that serve all levels of education at elementary, junior, high schools, or colleges. No doubt research in motivation produces answers to questions raised by researchers or institutions that look forward to improving the academic environment for students so that students' goals will achieve the intended outcomes. Therefore, if students' motivation to learn is enacted, the whole teaching environment will go smoothly. However, when a lack of motivation ends up in failures no matter how

teaching methods are easy to apply, the whole academic institution falls apart. Ultimately, students' main concern becomes focused on getting grades but not on the love of the subject they study. Here motivation plays an important role in the academic life of students when they know why they join college. Unless they have a clear set of goals, and their study does not satisfy their goals, challenges start to appear for instructors teaching them. I keep telling my students, "There is no point in teaching you if you are not willing to learn. Neither can I pour knowledge into your brains." Speaking of which I remind them of the English proverb: "you can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." This study provides remedies for students' lack of motivation at our college. The results of the study were obtained via interviewing students, and observation of their behavior during classes.

**Keywords:** theories of motivation, lack of motivation, challenges, consequences, remedies, the power of the subconscious mind.

### 1. Theories of Motivation and Learning

All humans need motivation. It is as important as food, water, clothing, shelter, etc. Without it, we lack a desire to do, study, work in all walks of life. People do exist physically; they also exist mentally. Both physical and mental traits are needed to move people from being idle and disinterested in being active and ambitious. The derive for a person to achieve goals, dreams, wishes, depends on motivation

whether they are a parent, a student, a worker, a scientist, or whether they are sick or healthy, successful, or a failure. Motivation creates wonders for human minds. Motivation is “a topic of interest to researchers in a variety of fields including psychology, human development, education, sociology, and business.” Most researchers link motivation with goals, interests. Goals are of two types: “Mastery goals and Learning goals. These fall into two categories: “intrinsic motivation” which creates interest in the individual. Other kinds of goals are “performance goals and ego goals.” These fall into “extrinsic” motivation which is “situational” and requires” attribution” (Stirling 2013: 1-2). [1]. The researcher here summarizes Murphy’s and Alexander’s classification of motivation at the turn of the 1990s of the last century. she only cites the ones which serve the purpose of her study. She also cites Maslow’s hierarchy of needs to “distinguish between behavior and motivation.” These needs and a person’s desires are “to satisfy them” and she states that one can consider them as “intrinsic.” What is crucial in this regard is that “there are many- goal-oriented approaches: mastery goals and performance goals.” Then she distinguishes between these goals. “mastery goals focus on individual improvement” and “is related to increased competency. In contrast, completion, rewards, successes, and failures displayed publically in the classroom foster “performance goal orientation. Performance goals create a culture of competition and comparison in which ability and self-worth become linked in student’s minds.”(Stirling: 4-5).

Sterling discusses “Self – Determination Theory (SDT) because, for her, it incorporates “both the intrinsic and extrinsic factors in human motivation. As a meta-theory, SDT encompasses five – mini theories: Cognitive Evaluation Theory (CET), Organismic Integration Theory (OIT), Causality Orientations Theory (COT), Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT), and Goal Contents Theory (GCT).” She concludes her discussion of these theories by also citing Ryan and Deci who claim that “the conceptual framework on which SDT is based identifies three basic needs on which psychological health and well - being depend: competence, relatedness, and autonomy.” What is interesting in her research is that she explains each theory on its right. For example, CET addresses the topic of the impact of social contexts on intrinsic motivation” in this regard she finds that “ competence and autonomy are crucial aspects of intrinsic motivation.” However, she states that OIT is “extrinsic motivation and it proposes a continuum of internalization through which an individual may develop autonomy with regard to extrinsic conditions.” As for GCT, she states that the theory “addresses intrinsic motivation. The theory argues that goals that support the three basic needs of autonomy, relatedness, and competency will support psychological well-being, while extrinsically oriented goals will negatively impact well – being.” Additionally, she finds that GOT is “concerned with individual orientations toward environments” which are of three categories: autonomy orientation, the control orientation, and the impersonal / a motivated orientation.” Finally, she finds that BPNT proposes the three basic needs (autonomy, competence, and relatedness” and argues that environments that support these needs promote psychological well – being.” Her striking finding through reading much of literature and studies concerning learning and motivation is that “studies have shown that the more externally regulated motivations, the less interest and effort students display and the more students are likely to blame others for negative outcomes. So, a greater internalization of extrinsic motivations should lead to benefits in terms of active engagement and persistence by learners. Creating learning environments that foster the internalization of extrinsic factors may be one way to support positive academic outcomes”(Sterling: 6-8). These theories almost repeat each other, however, there are other theories that relate motivation and learning in empirical ways and these will be discussed below.

These theories pave the way for student’s motivation as a necessity for learning in all levels of education. An important note to clarify the term agency. It “refers to the thoughts and actions taken by people that express their power (Cole 2019: 1). [2] According to some critics of an individual agent who

gives in-depth- analysis, argue: “Most of us have a strong desire to play an active role in shaping our own lives. We invest effort and time in striving for long-term goals and stay on developmental paths that we think will help us achieve those goals. For those goals that we consider important or essential, we will combat challenges and resist being diverted by other competing goals. This striving for long-term goals provides us with a sense of personal agency in our lives. In the context of life-span development, individual agency is about motivation and action for long-term goals.” (Heckhausen, Wrosch, and Schulz 2019: 1) [3]. Thus, one’s long – term goals shape his/her ambition through motivation. Whereas, short.- term goals are temporary and disappear as the basic needs are accomplished, such as passing a test or meeting deadlines or having foods and drinks, or offering parties.

## **2. Challenges Facing College Instructors in the Process of Teaching**

Like the family who provides their siblings with the best means to live, and learn in the school of life, schools, colleges, and universities do their best for students to learn and succeed in their studies. However, good results as expected as these institutions have desired to happen are discouraging. Here come the big questions that need immediate answers: Parents ask their siblings:” Why are you failing at school and yet we provide all that you need?” In a similar vein, college and university instructors ask their students: “Why have you failed the tests and the questions you were asked to answer were from the syllabus?” Researchers of motivation argue: “Students arrive at school with an already well-developed self-image of competence or incompetence resulting from messages they have received at home since birth. Whether they have been encouraged to persevere when faced with challenges or coddled and discouraged from taking risks to overcome obstacles, students' beliefs about their abilities will affect their level of motivation and engagement. A learner's self-efficacy (one's belief in one's ability to succeed in specific situations) can greatly influence his or her motivation. In general, students with high self-efficacy are more likely to give more effort to complete a task and to persist longer than a student with low self-efficacy”(Gregory and Kaufeldt 2015: “Self- Efficacy” [4]. This is one of the biggest challenges facing teachers and college instructors. Out of my long teaching career, I found that motivation precedes education. Whether, a child, a grown-up will not learn any subject or even develop a social habit when he or she is not interested. In this respect, researchers of motivation argue: “Education reform advocates have dedicated huge amounts of time and energy to improving public schools and raising student achievement. But with attention currently focused on factors like improving teacher quality, overhauling curriculum and standards, and developing new assessments, one major factor is being overshadowed: the motivation of students themselves. Even with best administrators, faculty, curriculum, and materials in place, if students are not motivated to learn and excel, achievement gains will be difficult, if not impossible.” The researchers also claim: “Higher motivation to learn has been linked not only to better self – esteem, and social adjustment, and lower dropout rates. They conclude that “not only is student motivation the final piece of the school improvement puzzle—without it, the rest of the puzzle falls apart” (Center on Education Policy 2012:1-2). [5]. This is absolutely true. I have experienced many challenges like the ones above mentioned and many more while I was a teacher, at school, college, and now as a university instructor. In reality, parents want their children to be like them; they want their children to study certain subjects for future prospects—becoming a lawyer, a police officer, an engineer, a doctor, etc. Parents here are egoistic; they want their children to be copies of themselves, neglecting their interests, hopes, goals, and desires. Consequently, teachers at school or instructors at college cannot make them hard-working students. “Data indicate that lack of motivation is a real problem affecting large percentages of students, according to a 2004 National Research Council Report” [5].

### 3. Con sequences of students' lack of Motivation.

When students lack motivation, this produces serious consequences or bad results to the expectations of parents, school and college and an even higher level of decision-making agency such as the ministry of education or ministry of higher education—these institutions are concerned with the quality of education in schools, colleges, and universities. When students' level of education does not match the learning outcomes, as expected, complaints are heard among families, in the press, and among educators themselves. The root cause of all this is a lack of motivation. If this phenomenon is not given enough research and priority over other problems the whole system of education will collapse. Students should be taught how to motivate themselves by setting clear goals demonstrated by their parents at home and by educators or social experts working at school or colleges.

Before we delve into the consequences of a lack of motivation, we should discuss the essence of the relationship between motivation and education. “From an educational point of view, motivation is a polyhedral structure which is associated with learning and academic achievement.” Thus, “in the field of education, motivation is a three-dimensional phenomenon that includes beliefs about one’s ability to perform the desired activity, reasons or purpose for doing that activity and emotional reactions associated with the activity.” Psychologists examine motivation as a set of forces that cause people to be engaged in a particular behavior.” That is why motivation is linked with need. “Motivation and need are important to create a situation to satisfy [the] individual.” When a student, for example, needs to study for an exam, his goal is to pass it. If he does not do that he fails. This is a short- term goal. On the other hand, if a student desires to get a good average, say, B Plus Or A Plus, he has to continue studying with eagerness and constant determination to achieve such a goal. This effort can produce a long- term goal which takes more, time, effort, and knowledge. Thus, needs can be accomplished in short or long periods of time. But what happens when these needs are not fulfilled? “The basic principle of motivation is based on ability and motivation. According to this principle, any task cannot be performed successfully unless the person, who has chosen to do it, has enough ability to act. The motivation process begins with the determination of the goal forces. Personal needs are lacks that in a certain time [the] individual grapple with them. These deficiencies [needs] may be psychological, such as necessity—need to be recognized by others, or social such as finding friends” (Pakdel 2013: 240- 243). [6]. These are serious factors if neglected learning does not achieve the desired results, but it can be described as “ a getting by process” which means staying at school or college for other prospects: waiting for a job interview or enlisting in the army; students have already done the formalities of the job; school or college is just a temporary place to stay in till possible chances arise along the course of their study.

On the first week of college, the dean gives a long speech about students' goals and college objectives, to those who have just joined college. And out of my long teaching experience, I claim that these goals and objectives work proportionally. When students have clear goals about their study prospects, they adapt to college objectives smoothly. On the other hand, if the goals have not been set in the minds of students, college objectives, and learning outcomes will never ever be fulfilled. This category of students lacking motivation starts missing lectures on their first academic week; they do not participate in any class discussion; they come late to classes; they do not take notes; they even miss their exams and ask for makeup tests. Instructors at the college level find it impossible to motivate and educate such students. Why? It is simply because these students lack motivation and basic needs. “The brain's original purpose was not to go to school but to survive and thrive. Several theorists have suggested which basic needs are most important to humans and suggest that these needs must be met in order to allow us to eventually focus on learning” (Gregory and Kaufeldt 2015: Basic Needs and Choice Theory). Consequently, they do not study for any exam; they never show up for any cultural activity or participate

in sports, drama, or any activity. Such students are difficult to handle. They consume much energy, effort, and time of college instructors, administration, and the dean and vice deans. They are problematic cases which need research through experts and instructors and dean and vice dean of the academics. Any organization in the world should find solutions when it finds problems in production, education, or any issue which needs tackling; otherwise teaching, or working becomes tedious and useless. Continues investigation of the undesirable phenomenon, or learning outcomes should be a practice among all levels of decision-makers in any organization be it school, hospital, college, or university. The more research to address the problem is given the fewer the problems and the more successful the organization of any kind will be.

#### **4. Remedies for Lack of Motivation For Students at College Level**

Like in medicine, doctors diagnose the problem with their patients, then they prescribe medicine for their patients. So far I have been discussing, motivation and its theories challenges encountering instructors when teaching unmotivated students, and the consequences of the lack of motivation; what if students do not want to learn. Now we arrive at the most important part of my article, remedies, which are crucial to motivating students who are reluctant to learn anything at school or college, be it sports, drama, educational or social activities. Wilcox suggests some practical remedies for unmotivated students such as firstly, “Promote growth mindset over fixed mindset.” He cites Dweck’s book *Mindset*, who “argues that students have an underlying belief about learning: either a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. A fixed mindset belief suggests that people are born with or without certain abilities and talents and that abilities cannot be changed. Fixed mindset learners try to prove themselves and will often shy away from challenges because they do not appear to be struggling. A growth mindset learner, on the other hand, believes that abilities and talents can be cultivated and improved through hard work. Growth mindset students enjoy a challenge and see struggles and failures as necessary parts of growth. Learners with a growth mindset are certainly more motivated to work hard.” Wilcox suggests one of the strategies used in almost all schools and colleges, which is praise. “Praise for abilities over efforts reinforces the fixed mindset student that students have the ability or they don’t and no amount of hard work on the learner’s part can change the outcome. We are all learners, and should be encouraged as such.” In this respect, he claims, “As teachers, we can model the growth mindset. Have courage! Ask students for feedback about your teaching and be willing to make necessary changes,” I myself at the end of the course ask my students their opinion of my teaching methods: strengths and weaknesses Their statements or opinions become a kind of strategy for the next course. This method is very helpful for both motivated and unmotivated students. As for Wilcox, he also demands that teachers “be dedicated! Work hard for students and share how hard work and dedication translates to success and growth. This feedback shows that we, too, are learners. It also invites our students to continue on the learning journey alongside us. Students are always willing to work hard for a teacher that is reciprocating that hard work” (Wilcox 2018: 1-3). [7] Unfortunately, our students break this generalization. They tend to do little work and never believe in hard work; of course not all of them, but the majority of them look for easy ways of learning; their goals are humble in life; they find college as a place that offers a degree without much effort. In this light, other critics claim: “when students are struggling with poor academic performance, low self – efficacy or low motivation, one strategy that may help is to teach them how to learn. That is, to outline specific strategies for completing an assignment, note-taking, or reviewing for an exam” (Carleton.edu). [8] This practice I have been doing for a long time and it works well for weak and unmotivated students.

Wilcox suggests another remedy for motivating students: “Develop meaningful and respectful relationships with your students.” He argues: “When teachers are willing to share personally and become

venerable, students are more likely to do the same. When learners see one another as whole people, they are more willing to take risks, and ask questions they need to ask to obtain success.” This sounds practical in some communities where openness or frankness is one of the best means to communicate with your students. However, in our community, students, are reserved. They hardly speak about personal things or discuss them in class. It is a risky job to do as such in such an environment. Inwardness is a rule rather than an exception. Motivating students on a personal level may work in some communities, but in others, it cannot and won’t happen. It is more like a taboo to discuss personal things in class. Interestingly enough, Wilcox states a general observation about how people learn. “We all learn differently. In each classroom, several types of learners exist: visual, tactile, verbal, and more reserved. We do it as our responsibility to discover this by knowing them and endeavor to teach them accordingly. This work results in our ability to know our students which leads to a more cohesive, open learning community.” My objection to this is that as I have already pointed out in more reserved communities teachers or college instructors are asked to be formal with their students in the class. If opportunity offers, a practical joke could be thrown and it should not be open to bad interpretations. Besides, Wilcox in his second remedy addresses children at school, not college students who are prone to formal teaching like performing experiments in labs, taking lectures, or sitting for tests. In our college, an “open learning community” may embarrass instructors more than students who sometimes ask funny questions causing in wide laughter, which may result in losing control over the class and agitate the instructor allowing such a situation.

Thirdly, however, Wilcox prescribes a very practical remedy for teaching, but he does not discuss motivation: “Grow a community of learners in your classroom.” He suggests that teachers should replace the traditional teaching method with the modern one. He demonstrates it as follows: “Traditional teaching consists of teachers lecturing and learners taking notes, followed by the learners doing independent work to check for understanding. Transforming this outdated model to include more time where students are talking to students brings about a true community. Collaborative group work should be the activity between the teacher’[s] lecture and the independent work. Learners participate in what could be considered the “problem solving” phase of their development with new ideas, and together understanding they come to new learning. This gradual release of responsibility from teacher to student encourages a deeper understanding of lesson rather than rote memorization; thus the students are participants in their own learning, rather than witnesses to the instructor’s knowledge”. This remedy works for motivated students, but it does not work for unmotivated students. Generally, our students are shy to express themselves in class. I tried many times to follow Mr. Wilcox’s suggestion of using a collaborative group instead of the traditional method of teaching where teachers or instructors are preachers. I keep saying to my students, “listen I am not preaching you; I am teaching you how to think independently and participate in the group.” The funny thing, I myself end up frustrated and demotivated.

Finally, I think his other remedies are about the role of teachers to motivate their students such as” Establish high expectations and establish clear goals”. By this, he means: “Once the routines to support expectations are established and clear to the learning community, learning becomes the most important action in the classroom.” I think this role should be reciprocal; if students do not have clear goals for their study, teachers will not predict any expectations from unmotivated students. Wilcox’s remedy here works only for highly - motivated students. He concludes his discussion of remedies with the most important remedy which he prescribes as ”Be inspirational” which he tackles as follows: “Inspirational teachers represent success to their students. Students internalize our behaviors and strategies as a way to accomplish their own goals. We allow them to do so in our everyday routines, assignments, and encounters with them.” However, these remedies are not to be taken as a rule. They

should be modified according to the level of students, their culture, and their desire to learn; otherwise, teachers will waste their time, and effort to teach the unmotivated students. Generally, some researchers of academic motivation argue: “In the educational domain, it is important to promote learning environments that do not press students toward outcomes but rather support task involvement and the opportunity to choose personal goals and task strategies (autonomy), offer students optimal challenge, positive feedback and informational rewards (competence), and enable students to feel accepted (relatedness)” (Puklek and Podlesek 2019: 570). [9]. That is what Self- Determination Theory should be all about. It brings fruitful outcomes if applied with patience, experience, and knowledge of student’s personalities: psychological needs and choices. Additionally, the wisdom of instructors in handling academic motivation will add to the success of students and educational institutions. Another strategy which is a multipurpose practice; it applies to many domains of knowledge; it is Murphy’s wonderful theory and practice put together to heal and motivate the miserable or the unlucky ones.

### **5. Murphy’s Strategy of Using the Power of the Subconscious Mind**

The whole business of psychology is the study of the human mind and behavior of human beings; it works wonders if used properly and ethically. We keep saying to our students, or children or those who work for us: “Use your mind!” But to use the power of the subconscious mind as a strategy in all domains of knowledge and life as Murphy claims in his book is something new in the field of motivation. He writes: “Throughout this book, I use the terms conscious and subconscious to represent the dual nature of your mind.” He argues: when your mind thinks correctly, when you understand the truth, when the thoughts deposited in your subconscious mind are constructive, harmonious, and peaceful, the magic working power of will respond.” Then he prescribes important tips to demonstrate certain things you think are impossible to do. Now with the power of your mind over your subconscious mind, you can achieve wonders. Below are the most important pointers which anybody, whether, a student, a TV star, a businessman or woman, a sick person, or healthy one can follow: “Your subconscious mind is the builder of your body can heal you. Lull yourself to sleep every night with the idea of perfect health, and your subconscious mind, being your faithful servant, will obey you.” He gives an example of a person who has been diagnosed with cancer. However, when following this strategy, “complete healing followed in about a month’s time. Subsequent tests showed that the cancerous cells were no longer present.” This proves evident when a person believes that God heals sick people who truly believe in Him. Spirituality makes wonders in such cases. His other strategy sheds light on an aspect of people who are going getters, who can get what they want and they don’t believe in the impossible. Murphy advises the readers of his book: “Never use such expressions as “ I can’t afford” or I can’t do this. “ Affirm, “I can do all things through the power of my subconscious.” He demonstrates: “Check regularly on the negative suggestions that people make to you. You do not have to be at the mercy of destructive heterosuggestion (you ‘ll fail, It’s no use, You just can’t win, etc). All of us have suffered from it in our childhood, in our teens, and in adulthood. Study these things said to you, closely examine their underlying meaning, and you will discover that many of them were nothing more than a form of propaganda. Its conceded purpose was—and is—to control you by installing fear in you”(Murphy 2019: 7-8, 15, 31, 81). [10]

I object to the last statement very strongly. Some of us really cannot do certain things. It is natural when others tell us we cannot do these; they do not mean to fear us. They tell us the truth about our abilities. As a college instructor, I tell students, “Look, you have a problem with language, and you have to fix it.” Here I am motivating the weaker students to work harder to be in line with others, rather than stay behind in their studies. When people say something negative to you and they mean it, this applies. Then Murphy is right; these people are jealous of you or envious. These people may be your collogues, friends, classmates, etc.. However, a father or a mother when they blame his/ her children for not doing

well in their studies, they do not mean to cause fear to their children. The same applies to your teachers, college instructors, trainers, doctors, nurses, officers. They want you to follow what is good for you and for them: getting the job done. From an educational point of you, teachers and instructors, make sure: “The delivery plan is not to be taken for granted. Make amendments to the original plan set by the school or college. Through my long experience of teaching, I find out that the level of students and the book you have to teach from are good reasons for making necessary changes”(Zaiter 2020: 32-33) [11] This is a good strategy if you do not want to follow Murphy’s pointers which are to be used by professional such as psychologists.

### Conclusion:

Whatever your profession is, if you are intrinsically motivated, external motivation may not help. The whole process of motivation starts with you as a student, a teacher, or any working person. If you like what you do: set clear goals for your life, whether short –term goals or long –term ones. Ultimately, it will be possible to be what you want to be. All challenges must not hinder the learning outcomes. Remedies must be provided continually to make institutions of any kind more successful. Thus, when incentives are there, they are just external factors for motivating people. By so doing, they are drawn to the incentives like objects drawn to a magnet. However, when incentives disappear, work slows down and self- determination becomes another story. Academic motivation should be a priority to consider by all levels of educational institutions. It is as crucial as food, clothing, and shelter.

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