



**“I Came in Unsure of Everything”:  
Community College Students’ Shifts in Confidence**

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## Abstract

To improve low rates of credential attainment in community colleges, individual schools as well as a number of national organizations have developed a range of initiatives focused on increasing rates of college completion and student success. Although the importance of non-academic factors in college completion and student success has been well established, questions remain about the best ways to structure the community college environment to foster students' sense of belonging and promote behaviors that are associated with success.

This paper addresses this gap in the literature by focusing on the academic confidence of students at the outset of their community college careers, the ways in which their confidence may impact student behaviors and persistence, and how student confidence is affected by students' experiences in college. Using data from nearly 100 community college student interviews, this paper examines students' descriptions of their confidence upon entering college and of the shifts in confidence they experienced early in their college careers.

Our findings suggest that student confidence is shaped in part by past academic experiences and expectations of college upon entry. Using student descriptions of their perceptions of college and of themselves, we describe the characteristics of students who describe themselves as self-assured and those who identify as apprehensive. The interview data reveal that student confidence is continually shifting as a result of interactions with peers, faculty, and others. Our analysis also indicates that academic confidence can impact student motivation and academic behaviors that are associated with success. Importantly, this paper identifies the nature of those experiences that positively reinforce student confidence, events that we term *experiences of earned success*. Finally, we describe ways to structure classroom and other on-campus environments to create opportunities for students to experience earned success and ultimately enhance their commitment to academic pursuits.

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## **1. Introduction**

To improve low rates of credential attainment in community colleges, individual schools as well as a number of national organizations have developed a range of initiatives focused on increasing rates of college completion and student success. Efforts to align high school and college curricula and improve developmental (or remedial) course offerings are among the most popular approaches to improving student outcomes. While academic preparation is undoubtedly important to student performance in college, research has also pointed to the impact of non-academic and non-cognitive factors such as social integration, comfort with the cultural and institutional norms of college, and student motivation and confidence (e.g., Astin, 1993; O’Gara, Karp, & Hughes, 2008; Tinto, 1987). Although the importance of these non-academic factors in college completion and success has been well established, questions remain about the best ways to structure the community college environment so as to foster students’ sense of belonging and promote behaviors that are associated with success.

This paper attempts to address this gap in the literature by examining the academic confidence of students at the outset of their community college careers, the ways in which their confidence may impact student behaviors and persistence, and how student confidence is affected by students’ experiences in college. Based on our dataset and previous research, we define academic confidence as students’ certainty in their ability to meet the academic and social demands of college (Sander & Sanders, 2006). Confidence and related constructs such as self-efficacy have been previously identified as important to student performance (e.g., Cox, 2009; Wood & Turner, 2011), but existing research gives little indication of how confidence is shaped by day-to-day interactions in classes and on campus. Using data from nearly 100 interviews of community college students attending three colleges in Virginia, this paper examines students’ descriptions of their confidence upon entering college and of the shifts in confidence they experienced early in their college careers. We use these data to identify a set of approaches that instructors and other community college professionals can employ to positively influence student confidence to improve student success.

Our findings suggest that student confidence is shaped in part by past academic experiences and expectations of college upon entry, but continually shifts as a result of student interactions with peers, faculty, and others. In community colleges, these interactions largely occur in the classroom, but can also occur with support services staff and other personnel on campus. Using student descriptions of their perceptions of college and of themselves, we describe the characteristics of students who describe themselves as self-assured and those who identify as apprehensive. The interview data reveal that student confidence is subject to change, based on one's experiences in college. Our analysis also indicates that academic confidence can impact student motivation and academic behaviors that are associated with success in substantive ways. Importantly, this paper identifies the nature of experiences that positively reinforce student confidence, events that we term *experiences of earned success*. Finally, in addition to our analysis, we present possible strategies for structuring the classroom and other on-campus environments so as to create opportunities for students to experience earned success and ultimately enhance their commitment to academic pursuits.

## **2. Perspectives From the Literature**

### **2.1 Academic Confidence and Student Performance**

Social psychologists and cultural sociologists have long suggested that students' self-perceptions, as shaped by social interaction and personal history, are related to behaviors associated with academic performance. In particular, students' self-efficacy and confidence may be tied in important ways to their aspirations, their level of motivation, and ultimately their persistence (e.g., Bandura, 1993; Cech, Rubineau, Silbey, & Seron, 2011). For example, expectancy-value theory contends that effort is shaped by an individual's expectations for a successful outcome (Wigfield & Eccles, 2000). Similarly, psychologists have asserted that if a student does not expect to achieve success, he or she is less likely to engage in positive, self-regulatory behaviors related to academic performance (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2006).

Research suggests a range of factors that may shape the academic confidence of postsecondary students and that subsequently affect outcomes and success. For example, knowledge of and comfort with the norms and expectations of educational institutions has been identified as an important component of a successful transition to college (Leese, 2010), and theories of acculturation (e.g., Ogbu, 1992; Portes, 1999) suggest that cultural differences between home and school have implications for educational persistence and attainment. Similarly, a sense of inclusion and belonging on campus are considered important to retention and success (e.g., Tinto, 1987).

Moreover, it has been argued that dominant cultural narratives and persistently low expectations of certain groups of students, particularly working class students and students of color, are associated with poor academic performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995) and with an underdeveloped academic and collegiate identity (Howard, 2003). Likewise, research suggests that student perceptions about intelligence and learning as well as previous experiences with success and failure are associated with effort and achievement (Dweck, 2006; Gurin & Gurin, 1970), and research has demonstrated the importance of academic and interpersonal validation for student persistence and performance (Rendón, 1994). In sum, these perspectives indicate that a number of pre-collegiate and collegiate factors shape students' sense of themselves as competent students and are correlated with academic behaviors, persistence, and performance.

Recent research has attempted to determine the extent to which factors identified in the theoretical literature are correlated with student performance and outcomes, providing empirical support for the scholarship cited above. For example, data emerging from *The Statway* project of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching indicate that students' anxiety, uncertainty about their belonging, and beliefs about the nature of learning are correlated with student engagement and performance in math (Yeager, Muhich, & Gray, 2011). While the empirical research base is still small, findings thus far provide evidence that students' beliefs and behaviors have concrete implications for their success in college.

## 2.2 Community College Student Confidence

The subset of this scholarship that focuses specifically on community colleges suggests that community college students, who are more likely come from groups traditionally marginalized in higher education, may experience disjunctures between home and school and may have less access to information about how to be successful in college (e.g., Elizondo, Allen, & Ceja, 2012; Jehangir, 2009; Rendón, 2002). They also differ from their peers in four-year residential institutions in that they spend less time on campus and may have more off-campus roles and responsibilities. Given these factors and the persistently low transfer and graduation rates in community colleges, research that focuses specifically on how to help this population of students build a connection and commitment to college is of particular importance (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998).

Research in this area has yielded similar hypotheses to the ones put forth by the more general postsecondary research cited above, although some suggest that because students in commuter institutions spend the majority of their time in the classroom, faculty and courses play an especially important role for both social and academic integration in this context (Tinto, 1997). Scholarship also suggests that the multiple missions of the community college (Dougherty, 1994) may play a unique role in shaping students' expectations. For example, a long-standing theoretical perspective on community colleges suggests that they are sites in which students experience a "cooling out" of their educational aspirations (Clark, 1960). Clark argued that the open-access nature of community colleges, their dual mission as transfer and vocational institutions, and the limited resources available to students result in decreases in student ambitions. Specifically, students may assume blame for the obstacles they encounter that can deter them from focusing more intently on their academic pursuits. Researchers have subsequently contested this theory, with some arguing that many community college students' aspirations are "warmed up" so that students who had not previously planned to earn a degree subsequently aspire to do so (Alexander, Bozick, & Entwisle, 2008; Rosenbaum, Deil-Amen, & Person, 2006). Nevertheless, scholars on both sides of this debate appear to maintain that students' experiences interacting with faculty and with others in their institution have an important impact on student expectations, motivation, and goals.



Although the literature points to confidence as a potentially important catalyst for postsecondary success rates, few studies have explicitly explored the academic confidence of community college students. One exception is Cox (2009), who demonstrated the ways in which students' lack of confidence is connected to self-protective avoidance strategies that "prevent full commitment to the role of college student" (p. 77) and how such a lack of confidence can lead to attrition and poor performance. Importantly, she argued that "certain students require a specific kind of validating academic environment to overcome their fear of failure and complete their coursework" (p. 78). Unfortunately, research tells us little about what this environment might look like for community college students. To address this gap, this paper delves deeply into community college students' confidence in order to demonstrate how it is constructed and how it operates to bolster or undermine student perceptions of themselves as capable college students. By delineating the nature of students' shifts in confidence, this paper contributes to an understanding of how colleges can create opportunities to impact academic confidence and student success.

### **3. Methods and Data**

Drawing on a larger study of student success courses (Karp, Bickerstaff, Rucks-Ahidiana, Bork, Barragan, & Edgecombe, 2012), this paper uses data from semi-structured interviews with 97 students at three community colleges in the state of Virginia. Student success courses provide new community college students with basic information about going to college; they generally include a review of non-academic skills (e.g., note taking, study skills, and time management) and available student services (e.g., tutoring, library services, and career and academic planning). These courses are required for most incoming students in the Virginia Community College System.

We conducted interviews with students who had recently taken a student success course, most of whom were in their first semester of college. In addition to asking about their student success courses, the interview protocol included questions about students' expectations of college before enrolling, their college experiences to date, and how those experiences resulted in changes in their perceptions of college. Students were recruited to

participate in interviews in their student success courses and via advertisements on campus. Participants were relatively representative of the student population at the three colleges in the study. Just over half of interviewees were women, 35 percent were students of color, and 55 percent were between 18 and 20 years old at the time of the interview. Most interviews lasted approximately 40 minutes and were audio recorded and transcribed for analysis.

The construct of academic confidence emerged inductively from a thematic analysis of the dataset; in response, we established a series of codes to capture student confidence and the factors that impact it. Using NVivo qualitative data analysis software, the research team coded the interview data for instances in which students described their confidence.<sup>1</sup> We sorted those instances into descriptions of “past” and “present” confidence, and then coded for factors that appeared to interact with students’ confidence, such as knowledge about college, goals and plans, past experience and motivation; and for shifts in confidence.

In the sections that follow we first broadly outline the nature of the experiences of students who entered college with confidence, whom we refer to as *self-assured students*, and of students who were *apprehensive* about their collegiate endeavors upon entry. We then describe two types of shifts that emerged most prominently in our data. The first type of shift is rooted in *experiences of destabilization* that led students to reevaluate their understanding of what it means to be a college student and that in some cases undermined students’ confidence. The second type of shift results from an *experience of earned success*. Such experiences were prevalent among both apprehensive and self-assured students, and for some in our sample, were associated with positive shifts in confidence, enhanced motivation, and more robust academic identities.

For clarity and ease of language in this paper we use the terms *apprehensive* and *self-assured* in ways that might seem to imply that student confidence is static and unitary (e.g., we use the term *self-assured students*); however, the data suggest that confidence is highly dynamic and is related to particular tasks and domains. The instances in which

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of coding, we defined confidence as: “Students describe their certainty in their ability to be a good student, get good grades, persist, and/or complete college successfully. This may refer to one class or to college more generally. May include statements such as ‘it’s easy’ or ‘I was nervous.’”

students described their confidence were tied to particular subject areas or college tasks. Many individual students exhibited both apprehension and self-assurance, as they might have been confident about writing but unconfident about speaking up in class.

#### **4. Entering Students' Expectations and Experiences**

As students recalled their perceptions of college upon entry, their self-described confidence was tied to both their previous educational experiences and their expectations of community college. Apprehensive students described a lack of academic confidence upon entry to school; self-assured students, by contrast, reported feeling confident at the outset of their college careers. In the following sections, we present data that indicate how apprehensive and self-assured students understood their early college experiences and how academic confidence may impact student behaviors and performance.

##### **4.1 Apprehensive Students: "I knew nothing and I had to learn a lot really fast"**

Both previous research and analysis of our data suggest that many students enter community college with little confidence related to one or more aspects of college. Students' descriptions of low confidence were connected to expectations of college as challenging or frightening, to questions about their own skills and abilities, and to a lack of guidance and preparation for the academic and non-academic demands of higher education.

Our analysis of students' apprehension indicates that their low confidence was most often associated with their expectations of college, based on information they received about college from teachers, friends, and media depictions. For example, some students expected to have class in large lecture halls, with uncaring professors, or with little opportunity for contact with instructors. Many reported receiving warnings from others about their level of preparedness for college-level work. For instance, said one interviewee: "High school teachers give you a skewed image of college. ... They say, 'You're not going to be ready for college. You're not going to be ready.'" Negative feedback from past teachers contributed to student apprehension, particularly when it

called their academic abilities into question. Students recalled wondering if they were “smart enough” to succeed in college.

Students also voiced concerns about how well previous academic experiences had prepared them to take on the demands of college. For example, students commonly cited fears about time management, technology, and academic preparedness. Those returning to college after being in the workforce often worried about interacting with younger peers, using technology, and recalling how to do academic work. One student shared this:

I looked at my age and I looked at the technology, the computer, which I know very little about. ... Then I looked at how far advanced the other kids were coming from high school, those that were already in school and had been in school for a year or so, and how would I match to that?

Recent high school graduates often felt similarly unprepared. For example, some struggled to navigate the non-academic demands of college, such as figuring out registration and transfer requirements: “I got no guidance. Like I didn’t know how to apply for college classes. I had never even heard of [transfer] agreements. I knew nothing and I had to learn a lot really fast.”

In line with existing research findings, our analysis suggests that a lack of confidence often undermined success, as students expended less effort on tasks when they felt that they were likely to fail (e.g., Cox, 2009; Yeager et al., 2011). For example, one student recounted how her uncertainty about how to approach an assignment led to her disengagement from the class: “I was upset ... but I didn’t know how to do anything about it, first of all. And then I just gave up because I thought it was going to be difficult anyway.” In this quote, the student reveals not only her lack of understanding of the task, but also her lack of a strategy to seek help. As they described their frustrations, apprehensive students questioned their decision to enroll in college. Said one interviewee: “I was scared to death when I came back. ... [I was] nervous. Did I make the right decision?”

Our analysis thus illustrates that a lack of confidence may be associated with a lack of commitment to collegiate endeavors and with behaviors that may be counterproductive to academic success. However, as will be explored later, many students’ college confidence was reshaped by their early experiences in college,

suggesting opportunities to enhance students' sense of themselves as competent college students.

#### **4.2 Self-Assured Students: “I am going to be successful because I already have been”**

Students who were self-assured had high expectations for achievement or success in one or more dimensions of college. Our analysis suggests that, as with student apprehension, student confidence is strongly tied to prior experiences and expectations. According to our data, self-assurance of success in college emerged in two ways. Some self-assured students acknowledged that college may prove challenging, but were confident in their ability to employ strategies to succeed. Other students were similarly self-assured, but with little apparent awareness of obstacles they could face in the future.

Both these types of self-assured students had largely positive academic identities, in part because they performed well in previous educational contexts: “I always think of myself as being a really smart somebody. ... I got through high school pretty good and I studied and I would just look at the material, do the work, and that was it.” In many cases, students connected their sense of confidence to their demonstrated ability to study, manage time, and meet deadlines: “Well I’ve never been a procrastinator. If I’m doing something, I want to get it done right then.”

Some self-assured students were aware of their academic weaknesses, but believed that they could manage them. For example, one student noted, “It’s just going out and [getting] the degree. You have to start at the bottom and work your way up.” As with students who were apprehensive, some of these students expected college to be challenging. However, students who expressed self-assurance talked about these obstacles with ambition rather than fear:

Math is a touchy thing with me ... but I think that can be overcome as far as I just need to take time to study and get that tutor. I think that ... it will just work itself out in the end.

They differed from apprehensive students in that they believed in their own ability to succeed or in their ability to access help when confronted with challenges.

In contrast, another group of students expressed self-assurance because they perceived that college would be easy. For example, some were informed by stereotypes of community colleges: “I expected it to be like ‘13th grade’ like they said. I thought it was going to be a lot more like high school than college.” Though misguided, this expectation that college would be a continuation of high school had fostered a sense that students did not need to change their academic habits and behaviors. For example, some students cited their ability to “get by” in high school as a reason for entering college confidently: “All through high school I’ve been one of the kind of students that’s kind of kicked back, didn’t really do my homework and I still did really good because I’m really good at like tests and absorbing information.” Taken together, this lack of information about the expectations of college, combined with prior academic success, contributed to some students’ expectations that they would succeed in college with little effort. As we describe later, many of these students reported subsequent poor academic performance and experienced moments of destabilization.

Both the student who believes she can be successful without doing homework and the student who is too fearful to begin an assignment must likely need to recalibrate their expectations of college and of themselves to achieve success. Many students in our study described feelings of apprehension and self-assurance, as their confidence varied across subject areas and shifted over time. Close analysis of these shifts provides insight into how colleges can offer opportunities for students to develop realistic understandings of the demands of college work and perceptions of themselves as learners who can meet those demands and achieve success.

## **5. Shifts in Confidence**

Regardless of how they recalled their confidence level upon college entry, interviews indicate that students’ confidence and sense of self are not static. Although the students described above had different previous educational experiences and differing expectations of college prior to enrollment, at some point in their early college experience almost all reported one or more shifts in their understandings of college and of themselves as learners. These shifts were related to specific skills or content areas, and

students appear vulnerable to multiple shifts over time. Learning about the changing nature of student confidence has important implications for fostering productive academic behaviors.

### **5.1 Experiences of Destabilization: “It’s been a wake-up call actually”**

For some students, early college experiences resulted in destabilization in an area in which they were previously self-assured. These shifts called students’ self-assurance into question because they revealed either the ways in which college was more challenging than expected or the ways in which the student was less prepared than expected. Our findings suggest that experiences of destabilization can have either positive or negative effects: they can result in positive changes to academic behavior, but they can also weaken students’ confidence and trigger apprehension in ways that undermine success.

Experiences of destabilization were most likely to emerge from negative feedback students received on their work. For example, students described shifts in expectations when they received low grades on assignments or when they could not complete their work on time using the study habits they employed in high school. As one student recounted, “I came to this [college] and I was still in that [high school] mentality. And it’s like, ‘Whoa, I’m failing.’” Students were surprised to find that college required different work habits than they expected: “You gotta do your homework and your class work or you’re not going to pass.” These statements reflect the vague and misinformed understandings of college that were common among our interviewees, and they underscore the ways in which poor academic performance catalyzed important realizations for some students.

Experiences of destabilization reshaped some students’ understandings of the type of work and effort required to succeed in college. As one student said, “I can’t be as lazy as I was in high school.” Another described how his perceptions of reading and studying were changing:

I didn’t know that there was so much in-depth [work] that comes with reading; [you cannot] just read the material and listen and go about your business. But it’s so much more—you have to understand your reading, you’ve got to know what you’re reading about.

Experiences of destabilization resulting from poor grades or feedback from professors helped some students understand the level of effort that college demands. Some of these “wake-up calls” were described by students in conjunction with newly acquired academic behaviors or positive self-reflection about the attitudes and habits required for success. For example, a student who struggled early in college reported: “When I first went to college, I thought it was a joke and didn’t really care about it.” Subsequently, this student and others who experienced destabilization reported feeling more engaged and committed to working hard in college. These shifts appear to be related to a desire to earn good grades as well as to a greater understanding of the habits and effort necessary to succeed.

Yet, our analysis also indicates that destabilizing experiences can be unproductive if they do not prompt changes in behavior or if they undermine confidence and lead to apprehension. This appears to have occurred with students who reported that their moment of destabilization occurred too late in the semester to make changes:

It started sinking in after the first week actually. I saw all this work that was not getting done and then it started piling up and they wouldn’t take late work. They said, “This isn’t high school anymore.” And then it really smacked me in the face when the class was over and I saw my grade.

Interestingly, this student identified a problem early on in the semester, but did not have a full understanding of the implications until he received a final grade. Other students shared a similar shifting awareness, also without reporting any ensuing changes to their behavior: “I don’t take notes but I probably need to start doing that because I’m not doing too great in college right now, because I’m not taking notes.” This student was reporting a dawning realization that college was more challenging than expected and had identified a behavior that might mitigate that challenge, but thus far had not put that behavior into practice. Thus, in our data, experiences of destabilization were not always accompanied by enhanced performance.

This was particularly true when students’ preparedness for college was called into question. For some students in our study, destabilizing experiences resulted in uncertainty about their ability to succeed. Even students who reported self-assurance when they



entered college appeared vulnerable to apprehension when they interpreted failure to be the result of their own skills and abilities. For example, one student who recalled feeling initially confident about college reported increasing apprehension about his ability to succeed. This manifested in a reevaluation of his career goals:

I'm definitely starting to think more realistic now because when you first get into college, like "I want to do this and this and this." And you're like "Well I can't, I'm not really smart enough to do that ... this is really hard to do." Like teaching is my main goal, but I have a fallback. My fallback is being a police officer ... or security guard.

Notably, this student described a shift in his sense of self as a learner in conjunction with a shift in his perceptions of the expectations of college. Not only does he now see college as more difficult, he asserts that he is "not really smart enough." Just as students who recalled apprehension upon entering college reported wavering commitment to their goals (wondering if they made the right decision in coming to college), this student reported a potential "cooling out" (Clark, 1960) of his aspirations.

As described previously, our analysis suggests that confidence is tied to students' understandings of their own abilities and to their expectations and understandings of college. When one or more of these expectations or understandings was destabilized, students reacted in a variety of ways. It appears that when students could readjust their expectations of the effort required for success in college and maintain their self-assurance, they often adopted new academic behaviors. However, not all students reported behavior changes, and some reported changes in their perceptions of their own academic abilities. In the following section, we outline a second kind of shift that appears to influence students' expectations of the rigor of college while also bolstering their sense that they can succeed.

## **5.2 Experiences of Earned Success: "So I realized, 'Hey, I'm actually smart'"**

The second shift in confidence we identify occurred when students received tangible evidence about their potential, which then inspired them to feel more confident about their college endeavors. These experiences, which we call *experiences of earned success*, reshaped students' perceptions of their own abilities, even if they coincided with

a realization that college was more challenging than expected. Experiences of earned success were varied but had three factors in common. They provided students with evidence of success, they resulted from that student's own actions or effort, and they were related to an identified area of concern or weakness. Students who reported apprehension and those who identified as self-assured both described experiences of earned success, suggesting that such moments can be salient even when students have stronger levels of confidence in some areas.

We identified experiences of earned success across three domains: performance in particular content areas, employment of academic habits, and navigation of the social demands of college. For instance, some students experienced success in using study skills:

That's when my class started to really pick up with the notes, and I was using my high school notes, and it was like it wasn't working. ... And [then, after practicing] it was like, now I can take notes in college.

Note that this student referred to an area of concern based on experiences with trying and failing to take adequate notes. After practicing a new technique, she saw evidence of her success, and her academic confidence in this area was enhanced. Similarly, other students reported evidence of success in their efforts to manage time more effectively or to work proactively to accomplish tasks: "In high school I was the biggest procrastinator. ... So, definitely I found out that I can actually get up and do stuff. I don't have to wait until the last minute."

In another example, a student describes math as an area of concern, based on her experiences in high school: "Like math, I did not do too well in high school so I did not think I was going to do that well here either. But I am actually doing good in it." In this example, her grades in math provided the evidence of her success. Positive feedback from professors and good grades were important ways in which students were given evidence of their earned success, but students were also affirmed in their efforts when they saw other positive results from their behavior. For example, a student described her concern about interacting with professors, and related a success experience that had emerged from asking questions of her instructors.

Talk to the professor, that was one of my main things was I don't like talking to my teachers. I feel, I guess, nervous when I go talk to them about school work. ... It was a little nerve-wracking at the beginning, but once they started answer[ing] my questions with good answers, I felt much better.

In this instance, the student ties her decrease in anxiety about talking to faculty members to the “good answers” she received. These good answers serve as evidence that her interactions with professors have been a success.

*Evidence of success* appears as a key feature in these experiences. For example, while students spoke positively about hearing a kind or encouraging word from a faculty member, in our data these were not tied to confidence or identity in the way that excelling on performance tasks was. The most powerful experiences students described were *earned*, meaning they were less likely to recount shifts in confidence from tasks they deemed “easy.” Finally, we found few examples of students’ confidence shifting when their assumed competence in a skill was confirmed; instead, experiences of earned success appeared most salient to students when they were tied to previous negative experiences or areas of apprehension.

When describing these experiences, students revealed their shifting sense of themselves as learners and, by extension, their shifting confidence. Experiences of earned success gave students evidence that they could meet the demands of college, thereby alleviating apprehension. Whereas previous educational experiences failed to answer questions about students’ ability to achieve, experiences of earned success bolstered students’ perceptions of themselves as competent learners: “Like my teachers in high school treated me like I was stupid and then I came here and got awesome grades. So I’m thinking, ‘I’m not stupid, I’m getting great grades.’ So I realized, ‘Hey, I’m actually smart.’” Our analysis identified not only shifts in students’ perceptions of their intelligence, but also in their ability to engage productively in the college environment. For instance, another student shared that that while she was initially apprehensive about a class that required group work, her efforts to participate with her peers yielded positive results and caused her to realize new strengths: “It’s weird because I didn’t think I was a

people person. But I find myself, when I go to class, I'm speaking to everybody and having small conversation and [getting] down to work."

As noted above, our analyses of shifts in confidence indicate that these successful experiences can also be associated with productive academic habits and behaviors. Students who experienced success applying skills and strategies stated their intention to continue using those approaches: "It's definitely progressing. If nothing else, I have seen that as long as I sit down there and I go through the painstaking process long enough, eventually I will spit out a good paper." Another student was initially reluctant to use campus resources, but expressed his intention to continue to access support services after a positive experience interacting with an advisor:

So when I pick up the phone or I get online and take like 30 seconds, even though I just spent 20 minutes brooding over it. I could have just gone and like called somebody. The problem is as good as solved, it's like once the ball gets rolling, the steps are laid out.

We saw evidence that experiences of earned success could provide positive reinforcement for the use of notetaking, time management, attending office hours, and utilizing campus services.

Just as we saw evidence that student aspirations could be diminished, or "cooled out," through experiences of destabilization, interview data suggest that aspirations can be "warmed up" by experiencing success. Students reported being recommitted to their academic goals and crafting new, sometimes more ambitious goals as a result of these positive experiences. As one student expressed after earning high marks during the first part of her first semester, "I am much more confident. I want to do everything. I want to be a doctor. I want to be everything. Seriously. It gave me a lot of inspiration." Some students reported new or reaffirmed intentions to transfer to four-year institutions:

For as long as I can remember Virginia Tech was so far out of my mind. Because, wow, I have to be like a perfect student to get in there. But I know now, my GPA is pretty good, I've got some study habits, and I have confidence. Like, why not.

Similarly, some students also reported considering new majors as a result of success in a particular discipline. One student said, “I might change my field after this, because reading is just really there for me now.” These data suggest that experiences in which students feel a sense of success can powerfully shape their commitment to college and their enthusiasm for academic endeavors. In the final section of this paper, we expand on this analysis to explore how colleges might create opportunities for students to experience success and shift the sense of themselves to that of a competent learner.

## **6. Discussion and Implications**

The findings presented in this paper confirm existing research suggesting that academic identity and confidence are socially constructed at the intersection of personal history and expectations for success. As has been suggested in previous research, when students do not expect to be successful they are less motivated and less likely to exert effort, and they may adjust their aspirations and engage in self-defeating behaviors to avoid failure (e.g., Cox, 2009). If their confidence is tied to a lack of information about the expectations of college, they may not engage in appropriate self-regulatory behaviors that lead to success (e.g., Yeager et al., 2011). Students reported that their confidence stemmed from success in particular subject areas, as well as from their ability to navigate the non-academic demands of college (i.e., interacting with professors and accessing support services). These findings therefore confirm recent research suggesting that helping students deliberately hone their academic *and* non-academic skills may improve students’ potential for success (O’Gara et al., 2008).

Like students profiled elsewhere (e.g., Law, 1995; Rendón, 2002; Villalpando, 2003), the students we interviewed faced a number of challenges in calibrating their perceptions of college and of themselves as they entered postsecondary education. Some were apprehensive because of previous negative educational experiences, expectations that college would be challenging, and a lack of preparedness. Many were misinformed about the demands of college, and for some those misperceptions were associated with self-assurance. One important strength of the current study is that it explores the shifting nature of the confidence of community college students in ways that have not been done

before. Specifically, we identify how experiences of destabilization and experiences of earned success, which reveal to students the connection between their own efforts and subsequent outcomes, can affect confidence and encourage or discourage positive academic habits.

The shifts in confidence described in this analysis demonstrate the ways in which confidence is continually reconstructed through interactions and academic experiences. During their interviews, students described multiple shifts in confidence across various subject areas. For example, some students who entered with self-assurance in a particular area described experiences of destabilization followed by experiences of earned success, suggesting a roller coaster of changing confidence over just a few short months. Based on these data and rates of student attrition in community college, even among students who persist into a second semester, we hypothesize that multiple, ongoing experiences of earned success may be necessary to maintain academic confidence.

The data highlight the potential of specific types of interactions with professors and staff to encourage positive academic behaviors and prevent the cooling of student aspirations. In the sections that follow, we discuss ways in which individual faculty members as well as departments and the college more broadly can create opportunities for students to earn success, calibrate their confidence appropriately, and develop positive perceptions of themselves as learners.

### **6.1 Earned Success in the Classroom**

When students in our interviews recounted experiences of earned success, they showed awareness of the connection between their academic habits and positive results. Teacher feedback, in the form of grades, written comments, and verbal exchanges, was an important way for students to recognize their success in the classroom. This evidence suggests that faculty members can structure experiences of earned success for students by making the results of students' efforts transparent to them. For example, students may benefit from constructive feedback (i.e., beyond a simple "good job") that shows how their work is connected to performance. Without feedback, students in our sample found it harder to measure their progress and were likely to make assumptions about their abilities that may or may not have been well informed or accurate. It was through regular

and timely positive and negative feedback that students calibrated their expectations for college and adjusted their behaviors.

While negative feedback in the form of poor grades may be damaging if it calls into question students' ability to succeed and persist in college, our data suggest that there is danger in lowering expectations or in decreasing standards for student success. Most students in this study reported that they expected college to be challenging and that challenging course material coupled with support provided motivation to succeed. As one student explained, "It is hard but I like being challenged a little bit." Thus, we argue for a number of strategies to facilitate opportunities for students to experience success, even as they practice and acquire new skills. For example, instructors may begin a course with an ungraded assignment to offer students low-stakes opportunities to practice employing the skills necessary for success in the course. By breaking a large, high-stakes assignment into its component parts, faculty can scaffold student learning and offer feedback more frequently with fewer repercussions for students' grades.

Interviewees' reliance on teacher feedback to gauge their learning suggests that students need additional opportunities to learn how to reflect on their work process and product. Learning how to self-assess gives students additional information about their progress and can be particularly useful for students who have little information about how to calibrate their academic behaviors to the demands of college (Karp & Bork, 2012). Likewise, if apprehensive students can learn to associate performance with effort rather than with innate characteristics or talent, they may be more likely to persist (Dweck, 2006). Asking students to reflect on the amount of effort they expended on a task or to evaluate their work against a rubric developed by the class can help students become more cognizant of the relationship between their academic behaviors and the grades they receive.

Finally, instructors across disciplines may also foster student success by providing opportunities for guided practice of academic skills such as notetaking and study techniques. When students in our sample experienced success after applying these skills, they reported increases in their academic confidence and an intention to employ them again. Similarly, accessing support was an area of concern for apprehensive students, as they expressed trepidation about their ability to interact appropriately with professors and

other staff on campus. Thus faculty can support students in class by embedding supports for students—such as tutoring or required attendance at office hours—into the structure of the course.

In sum, findings from this study suggest that instructors in all disciplines can create opportunities for students to experience earned success by helping them identify their own strengths and needs, providing guided practice on strategies to accomplish challenging tasks, and offering constructive feedback. In doing so, students can learn how to self-manage the challenges they encounter and maintain or develop their academic confidence and expectations for success.

## **6.2 College Structures to Support Success**

Comprehensive college-wide approaches to supporting and serving students can also help foster confidence. The data in this paper demonstrate how students' lack of knowledge and misperceptions of college impacted their confidence upon entry. Therefore, colleges should make greater efforts to provide students with realistic information about college expectations. This may happen through partnerships with high schools or through programs on campus. For example, the colleges in our study offered student success courses, required in students' first semester of study. These courses hold promise in helping students develop the academic habits (e.g., study skills and time management), self-assessment skills, and help-seeking behaviors that are associated with positive outcomes (Karp et al., 2012). Our analysis indicates that experiences of earned success occur when students apply success strategies and can see the result of their efforts. Thus, student success courses, workshops, or other orientation programs should not merely inform students about academic habits, but should also provide opportunities for students to practice and employ the knowledge and skills they learn in real academic settings.

However, given that students' confidence appears to shift continually and that experiences of earned success appear to be domain specific (i.e., in a particular subject, or related to the use of a particular strategy), we hypothesize that short-term interventions may not result in sustained changes to student confidence (Karp et al., 2012). For instance, students may not understand the relevance of a particular service or skill



because they have not yet identified an area of concern. As indicated by the data presented above, students encounter new challenges as their college careers progress, and new habits, skills, and strategies will be necessary for achievement. Thus, we suggest that students may benefit from ongoing opportunities to develop and practice their skills. Such opportunities may include intrusive supports that require students to interface with academic advisors, tutors, and other student services or student success workshops and activities that engage students within and beyond their first semester.

Finally, it is clear from our analysis that many experiences of earned success occur in the classroom as a result of interactions with individual professors. Students interact with faculty throughout their college careers, so instructors play a critical role in mediating student confidence. Yet most faculty are disciplinary experts with little training in how to support student non-academic needs. Therefore, colleges may need to offer learning opportunities for instructors to develop strategies to create experiences of earned success for the students in their classes.

### **6.3 Implications for Future Research**

To increase persistence and improve student outcomes in community colleges, additional analysis of students' experiences are needed to help us understand how student self-perceptions and confidence are related to attrition. This study raises a number of questions worth further exploration. For example, the notion of "experiences of earned success" emerged inductively from this dataset. More targeted research is needed on the nature of these experiences, how they may differ across disciplines, the relative effectiveness of the strategies recommended above, and additional classroom practices that might foster student confidence.

Given that student confidence is not static, future studies should examine when and how shifts in confidence occur for both successful and unsuccessful students. For example, an extended study of a student cohort may offer insight into how confidence shifts over multiple semesters, thereby providing practitioners with a greater understanding of when to intervene. Understanding when and how these shifts typically manifest is important for designing strategies that may help maintain the momentum that students gain through their early experiences of earned success. Similarly, the field of

postsecondary education research would also benefit immensely from studies involving students who have left community college without earning a credential in order to better understand deterrents to success and ultimately how to prevent such deterrents. Finally, additional perspectives on the social forces that shape students' academic confidence and their expectations for success have much to contribute in helping educators create environments in which students perceive themselves as competent students and become and remain committed to their postsecondary academic and professional aspirations.

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