

What We Know About Purpose & Relevance from Scientific Research

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JULY 2015

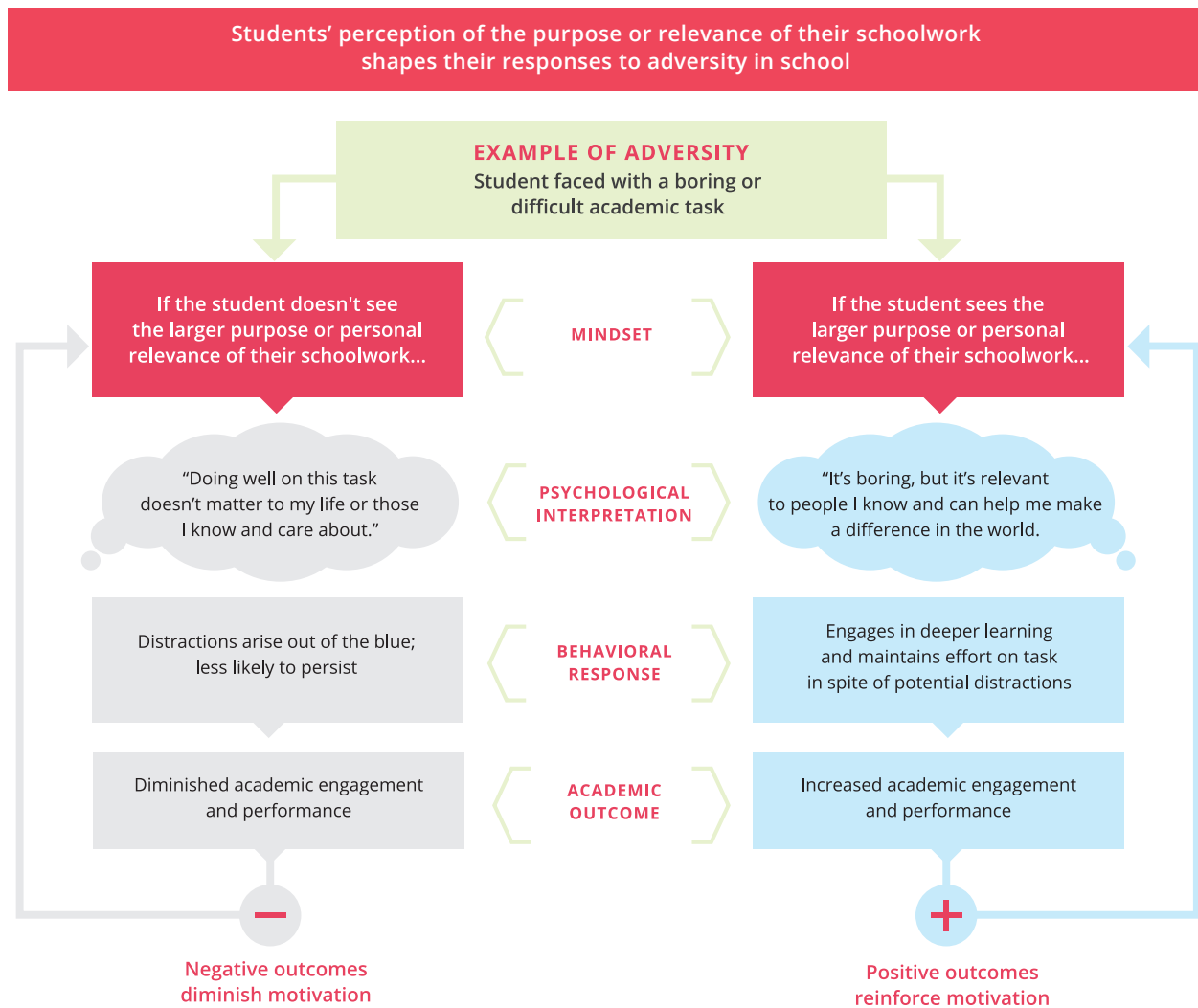
PURPOSE & RELEVANCE: WHAT IS IT?

Students value school when they understand how it is related to things they care about and how school can help them reach their long-term goals. Students value their schoolwork when they believe it is relevant to their lives and/or will help them connect to a purpose that is bigger than themselves—whether it is a contribution to their family, their community, society at large, or something else.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Students see greater value in their schoolwork when they understand its **relevance** to their own lives and when it connects to something they personally value,

such as a **purpose** that is bigger than themselves. When students understand the value of their schoolwork, they show greater interest in their schoolwork, and are better able to “learn deeply” and resist distractions.



**MINDSET
SCHOLARS
NETWORK**

Hosted at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University, the Mindset Scholars Network is a group of leading social scientists dedicated to improving student outcomes and expanding educational opportunity by advancing our scientific understanding of students' mindsets about learning and school.

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Students who see their schoolwork as connected to a larger purpose or relevant to their lives maintain focus in the face of challenges or boredom and learn more deeply

Boredom or frustration are by definition unpleasant. When feeling those emotions, students may ask themselves, “Why am I doing this?” If students have a hard time answering this question, they are less likely to spend the time necessary to try to learn deeply from the material at hand. On the other hand, if a student sees how her schoolwork can help her understand something personally meaningful, she may be more motivated to persist and remain focused despite distractions. When students learn the material more deeply, they can do better in school.

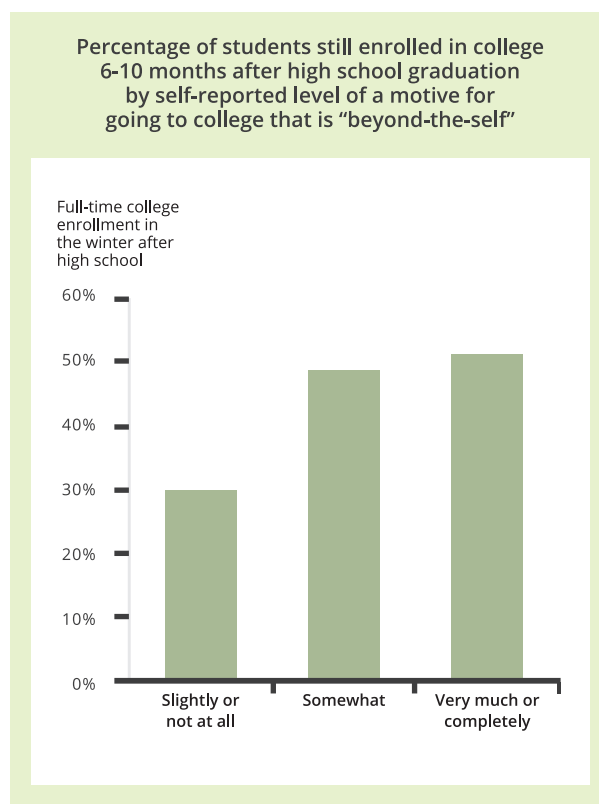
Students who hold goals that are larger than themselves are more likely to persist in school

Research especially shows that *self-transcendent goals*—goals that are connected to some aspect of the world beyond the self—may be particularly motivating to students in the face of difficulties or frustration. In one study, researchers examined the relationship between self-transcendent goals (e.g., “I want to gain skills that I can use in a job that helps others”) and college enrollment. The more high school seniors endorsed self-transcendent motives for going to college, the more likely they were to remain enrolled full-time in a 4-year college the following winter, even controlling for factors like IQ (see Figure 1).¹

WHAT WE’VE LEARNED ABOUT HOW TO PROMOTE GREATER PURPOSE & RELEVANCE

Mindset programs that encourage students to connect schoolwork to their everyday lives or to their long-term goals, especially a larger purpose, increase students’ perception of its value. These programs often ask students to generate their *own* explanations of how it is connected to a larger purpose or relevant to their own lives rather than *telling* students why school is important.

FIGURE 1. The more high school seniors endorsed self-transcendent motives for attending college, the more likely they were to remain enrolled full-time in college



SOURCE: YEAGER ET AL., 2014

Help students identify the usefulness of coursework in their own lives

In a study aimed at helping high school students see the relevance of what they were learning in their science courses, researchers randomly assigned some students to write in a journal about the usefulness of the course material in their own lives over the course of a semester. Students in the control group simply summarized the material they were studying. Among students who had lower expectations for success in their science courses—who may have a harder time seeing the value of their schoolwork—those who received the program earned higher grades in their

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sciences courses than those in the control group (see Figure 2).² There was no statistically significant difference for students who had high expectations for success in science.

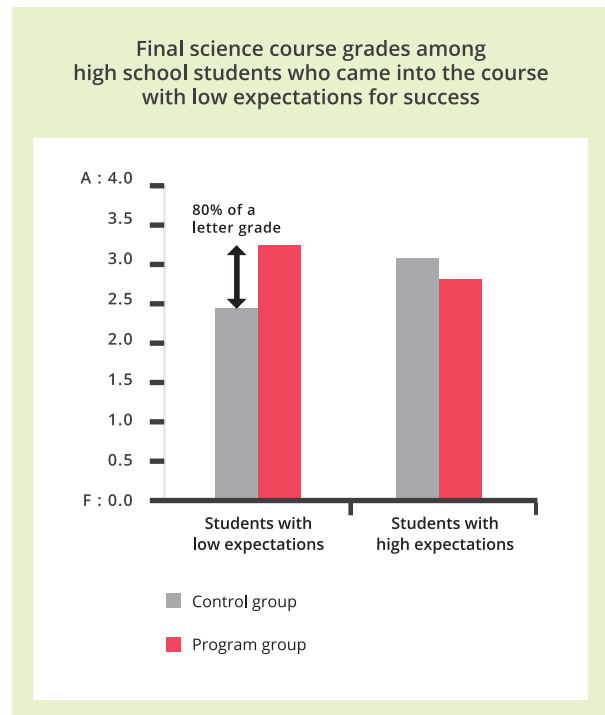
Build on students' desire to “matter” in life by tapping into a larger purpose for learning that motivates them

Another type of mindset program that has improved students' academic achievement focuses on what researchers call a “purpose for learning.” These programs use survey data and quotes from more senior students to help younger students understand how school can help them reach long-term goals that benefit both themselves and others. Students then write about how school can help them reach their own long-term goals. In a study with high school students, students randomized to the purpose for learning program earned significantly higher math and science grades than students in the control group.³ A similar program had a positive effect on community college students' accumulation of credits.⁴

Design learning environments that help students see the purpose & relevance of school

While they haven't been tested in the same manner as the mindset programs described above, many schools have adopted learning models and curricula that are designed to help students see the bigger purpose and relevance of school. A couple of K-12 examples include Expeditionary Learning and High Tech High, which emphasize project based learning, personalization,

FIGURE 2. Students who held low expectations for success in science courses earned higher course grades when they participated in a program that asked them to articulate the usefulness of the material in their own lives



SOURCE: HULLEMAN & HARACKIEWICZ, 2009

and connections to the world beyond the school. In higher education, programs such as Washington State's I-BEST program help community college students see the connections between the academic skills they're learning and the jobs to which they aspire.

This brief was edited by Lisa Quay, Managing Director of the Mindset Scholars Network, and David Yeager, Co-Chair of the Mindset Scholars Network.

¹ Yeager, D.S., Henderson, M., Paunesku, D., Walton, G., Spitzer, B., D'Mello, S., & Duckworth, A.L. (2014). Boring but important: A self-transcendent purpose for learning fosters academic self-regulation. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 107*, 559-580.

² Hulleman, C. S., & Harackiewicz, J. M. (2009). Promoting interest and

performance in high school science classes. *Science, 326*, 1410-1412.

³ Yeager, D.S., Henderson, et al., 2014.

⁴ Paunesku, D., Gripshover, S., Romero, C., Beaubien, J., Yeager, D.S., Walton, G.M. & Dweck, C.S. *Manuscript in preparation.*