

**the
psychology
of college
success**

a dynamic approach
henry clay lindgren



The Psychology of College Success

A DYNAMIC APPROACH

HENRY CLAY LINDGREN

San Francisco State College

JOHN WILEY & SONS, INC.

NEW YORK · LONDON · SYDNEY · TORONTO

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 68-56164

Cloth: SBN 471 53780 2 Paper: SBN 471 53781 2

Printed in the United States of America

To C. GILBERT WRENN
*for the many hours he spent
listening to the troubles of
a confused undergraduate*

Preface

ALTHOUGH this is a book about success, it is impossible to discuss that attractive subject without considering failure as well. Indeed, one of the points I make in the book is that success comes through learning how to fail, and failures may, in a sense, be considered as way stations on the road to success.

Not all students learn from failure, however. If past experience is any indication, more than half of the two million students who are starting college this year will drop out and will not complete the two-, three-, or four-year course they have started.

This prediction is all the more disturbing, since the great majority of those who will drop out have the capacity to succeed. As a citizen of the world, I am appalled at the wastage this loss of talent represents, for we are far short of having enough trained and educated people to provide essential services and to do the jobs that need doing. As a teacher and a counselor I am moved to sympathy by the frustration, discouragement, and psychic pain that most of these students will experience before they find out that, for one reason or another, they must leave college.

I am also in sympathy with a group of "partial failures"—those who *do* complete their courses but whose success in their chosen field will be something less than would be expected. These students will not fail, in the conventional sense, but their disappointments at not performing up to their expected standards will nonetheless be real and often poignant.

In addition to my sympathy for these educational casualties I also feel depressed when I realize that most of this could have been prevented if remedial measures had been taken at the right time. We have plenty of data to show that the majority of students who

are not doing very well or who even are at the very brink of failure can make dramatic recoveries if they participate in almost any type of organized help: tutoring, how-to-study courses, group therapy, counseling, reading clinics, and the like.

As we dig into the background of these failures and disappointments, we routinely run into two major causes: one that is attitudinal or emotional in nature, and the other, a matter of deficiency in one or more skills. These two types of shortcomings are generally interrelated. Students who have verbal problems—that is, students who cannot read rapidly and with comprehension and who cannot express themselves adequately in speech and writing when dealing with moderately complex material—are almost always individuals who, in the past, have not been particularly interested in developing such skills. Many of them, indeed, have felt quite negative about the insistence of high school English teachers that they read more books and improve their writing. Their attitudes and their deficiencies reinforce each other. Because of their apathy or their resistance, they did not learn the skills they now need, and because they had not learned the skills, they felt and also now feel negative toward them. I mention this particular interlocking set of attitudes and skills because it is a crucial one where college success is concerned—even practical junior college courses like floriculture, drafting, and practical nursing call for the use of communication skills. Attitudes toward getting involved academically and the ability to use study techniques are another pair of motives and skills that have a very important relationship to college success or failure, and there are still others.

The breakdown point at which students experience failure or disappointment comes when their skills fall short of instructor demands; hence the emphasis in most how-to-study books and courses is on the development of the necessary skills. My experience, however, leads me to believe that attitudes should have a higher priority than they ordinarily receive. In my opinion, when how-to-study measures succeed, they do so because students have developed the supporting and reinforcing motives that are needed before they can bring themselves to acquire and practice these skills. Indeed,

those students who have the drive and the dedication to succeed often develop the needed skills and techniques on their own without any outside help. This is shown by the relatively large numbers of "overachievers" who graduate each year, some of them with honors. These are students who have dedicated and committed themselves to the tasks of learning, but whose aptitudes, as measured by psychological tests, would have led one to expect failure of them, or, at best, only modest success.

Attitudes, in my opinion, are paramount. I say this partly because my professional biases lead me to trust human beings more than techniques, and attitudes, being largely emotional in character, are closer to the unique and human elements within us than are techniques. My appraisal is also based on more than thirty years of successes and failures in working with thousands of willing and unwilling learners of all ages, ranging from nursery schoolers to candidates for graduate degrees, adult education students, servicemen, and applicants for rehabilitation. During these years I have played many roles: teacher, counselor, adviser, therapist, and researcher. I have continued to work in this difficult and complex field because I am interested in learning and am fascinated by the problems, difficulties, and challenges it poses.

My conclusion regarding the importance of attitudes in success or failure in learning is drawn not only from countless hours of talking with students about their learning problems but from my own learning experiences as well. Time and time again, in my encounters with students, I have been struck by the fact that everyone seems to want to acquire better *techniques* of learning but is uninterested in or even resistive to the need to experience the kind of attitudinal or emotional changes that must precede or accompany any effort at learning if it is to succeed. The reasons for this reluctance are fascinating, and we shall examine them from time to time in this book. In fact, it was partly my interest in the emotional factors in learning that led me to write it.

And now we come to the main purpose of the book: it was written in the hope that the student who reads it will gain some new and useful perspectives on learning and its problems, perspec-

tives that will enable him to make a fresh start toward the successful completion of his college career.

As you go through the book, you will encounter a number of study techniques, some of which have been described in detail. I have, however, tried to keep these to the minimum. There are some excellent manuals specializing in study techniques that may be found in any college bookstore or library, and this book is not intended to supplant them, but rather to provide an antidote to what I consider to be one of their major failings. Whenever you are ready to make a real commitment to the tasks of learning, however, you would do well to read two or three of these manuals and to use whatever suits your special needs. If this book gets you as far as reading one of these manuals or, better yet, developing some of your own study techniques, it will have begun to succeed.

You will also find some advice in this book. I feel apologetic about this, for I know that if there is one thing that students have too much of, it is advice. Most of the advice they get is, furthermore, both unnecessary and irrelevant. But there are two problems that an author of a book like this faces. One is the difficulty of talking about learning and its problems without throwing out an occasional suggestion; the other is the need to provide something for students to start with—a kind of pump primer, so to speak. Although the advice I have included may be unnecessary, I feel reasonably sure that it is relevant.

Much of what I have said in this book has controversial overtones. I have already opened up one major controversy—that is, my affirmation that attitudes are basic to techniques, as far as learning is concerned. This controversy alone is worth several lively discussions, and I shall consider the book unsuccessful if it fails to stir up such debates. It does not matter whether I win the debate: one of my major objectives is to get you to think about learning and to raise questions about the way it should be done. When it comes to learning, most people are prisoners of a kind of “conventional wisdom,” as John Kenneth Galbraith would put it, and it is only by questioning it that progress can be made. After all, conventional wisdom has not been of much help to the millions of college students who fail

Preface

each year. Perhaps what they need is a fresh viewpoint, and that is what is attempted here. In any event, controversy leads to discussions, and it is my devout hope that this book will provide enough controversial material to serve as the basis of many discussions among students.

I cannot, however, take full credit for the ideas in this book, controversial or otherwise. They have, all of them, been borrowed or stolen from colleagues and students too numerous to mention and most of them long forgotten. Only the setting I have given them is original. Nevertheless, I would like to mention the helpful suggestions and encouraging support received from Eugene Raxten of Los Angeles Valley College. Finally, I am particularly grateful for the assistance given me by Edythe Moore, who typed the manuscript and served as a one-person reaction panel for the ideas expressed.

Henry Clay Lindgren

December 1968

The psychology of college success: a dynamic approach

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College and you

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WHAT kind of student is likely to have doubts about staying in college?

WHAT do extrinsic and intrinsic motives have to do with success in college?

WHY should students conceal their motives even from themselves?

WHAT do defense mechanisms have to do with college success or failure?

THE meaning of *success*: Why is it important?

EVERYONE knows that college students have more freedom than high school students, but freedom for *what*?

WHAT important decision must every college student make?

COLLEGE is likely to be more stressful than high school: What effect does this have on students?

WHAT answers do colleges provide for students' problems?

"...and then the prof said: 'The next paper will be due Monday.' You know, in three years of high school I don't think I wrote even *four* papers, and now these guys want a paper a week. I tell you, I'm about to climb up the wall with all this writing!"

"I didn't get bad grades in high school—mostly C's and some B's. I admit I didn't work very hard—more interested in having a good time. But now I'm working my head off and I'm failing. What goes on here, anyway?"

"I read my notes after the physics lecture and they were a mess of nothing. I couldn't make head nor tail out of them. So I just memorized the terms and the formulas. I'll do well to get a D in the course."

"I'm so confused that I don't know *which* way to turn. High school wasn't like this. Sure, I had my problems, but I *liked* high school. I wish I was back there; I'd go see Miss Kubrick and she'd help me work it out. Miss Kubrick was a real person, but these people look right through you as if you weren't there."

"College is OK, I guess. But my brother down at the plant is doing OK, too. With overtime and night differential, he's really raking it in. So I ask, what does college get me that my brother hasn't got? College is supposed to help you get ahead, but sometimes I think I'm losing ground."

Unhappy, perplexed, frustrated, lost, depressed, disappointed, irritated, confused. These terms describe the feelings that come over almost every college student at times, particularly during the first few months, when he feels the full impact of the college experience. Although each student considers his experiences as unique, some feeling of disorientation and confusion is virtually universal. Even students who seem poised, happy, and in complete control of the situation have their moments of doubt and despair.

The reactions I have described are normal ones. They occur partly because the college experience is a new one, but there is more to it than that. They also occur because these students have entered an environment that, on the one hand, is probably as free as any-

thing they will ever experience but, on the other hand, is both demanding and exacting. The reasons for students' successes or disappointments in achievement may, for the most part, be found in the way in which the choices and the tensions are generated by this perplexing situation.

The decision to enter college, like many of the important moves you will make during your life, is a voluntary one. Students choose to enter college because it seems to be the best option out of a number of available possibilities. They make this choice because they see college as the best way of attaining certain goals of importance to them. This book is concerned with the success or failure of students to reach the goals they have set for themselves on entering college: why they find satisfaction or disappointment and what steps they may take to improve their chances for success and to avoid failure. To present as meaningful a picture as possible, we shall be concerned with ineffective behavior, with effective behavior, and with the feelings and attitudes that are, in the long run, probably more significantly than the kind of techniques students employ. As with most undertakings, motivation is a crucial factor, and we shall examine it again and again throughout this book.

Why go to college? It is characteristic of the human animal that everyone thinks his reasons for doing things are unique. There is probably some truth in this belief—certainly the exact pattern of motives is different for each of the six or seven million students who frequent the hundreds of college and university campuses across the nation. Nevertheless, some recurring themes appear in the lists of motives that any sample of students might give as explanations for their presence in college. Let us begin with some of these reasons.

There are many ways to classify or divide up the aims that students have when they enter college. We could, for example, classify them as "distant future" or "immediate future," or as "materialistic" or "idealistic." It may, indeed, be interesting for you to jot down some of your own motives. You may be surprised to see what they are, once you get them down on paper and start classifying them. Any classification system can aid in self-understanding

by suggesting clues to the motives behind the motives, but at this point we need classifications that are general—classifications that can be applied to any student's list of aims or motives and that will suggest something about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of his behavior. Therefore, we shall discuss motivation in terms of the extent to which it is extrinsic or intrinsic—two dimensions that have considerable importance in terms of whether the college experience will be a successful one for you.

Extrinsic and intrinsic motives. Extrinsic motives, as the term indicates, have their sources *outside* of us and refer to behavior that we carry out in response to the demands and expectations of others, whereas intrinsic motives refer to behavior that is self-initiated. Here are some examples of extrinsic motivation:

Joe Blandon's family wants him to be a physician. He often says that he doesn't see much sense to the premed curriculum and that he is plodding along, taking courses as they come, because he knows that they must be completed before he can apply for admission to medical school. Sue Guft is not plodding, but drifting. She has not seriously thought of a major as yet, although she will be a junior next semester. She says that if her parents did not insist on her finishing college she would be an airline stewardess. Jack Kessel says that he is only going to school to keep out of the army. His brother, Sam, admits that the army may be a factor in *his* being in college, but says that he is more interested in the fact that college graduates make more money than high school graduates. Besides, employers expect a college degree these days. Joe Rosso has enrolled in the hotel-and-restaurant management course at the local community college. His family owns a motel and restaurant and expects him to take part in its management when he graduates two years from now. When asked why she is in college, Jill Shover answers with a question: "Where else is there to go? All my friends are here."

These motives are all extrinsic. It is as if the students were saying: "I have no real interest in what I am doing here. If others (medical school, parents, employers, friends) did not expect or de-