

What We Know About Purpose & Relevance from Scientific Research

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PURPOSE & RELEVANCE: WHAT IS IT?

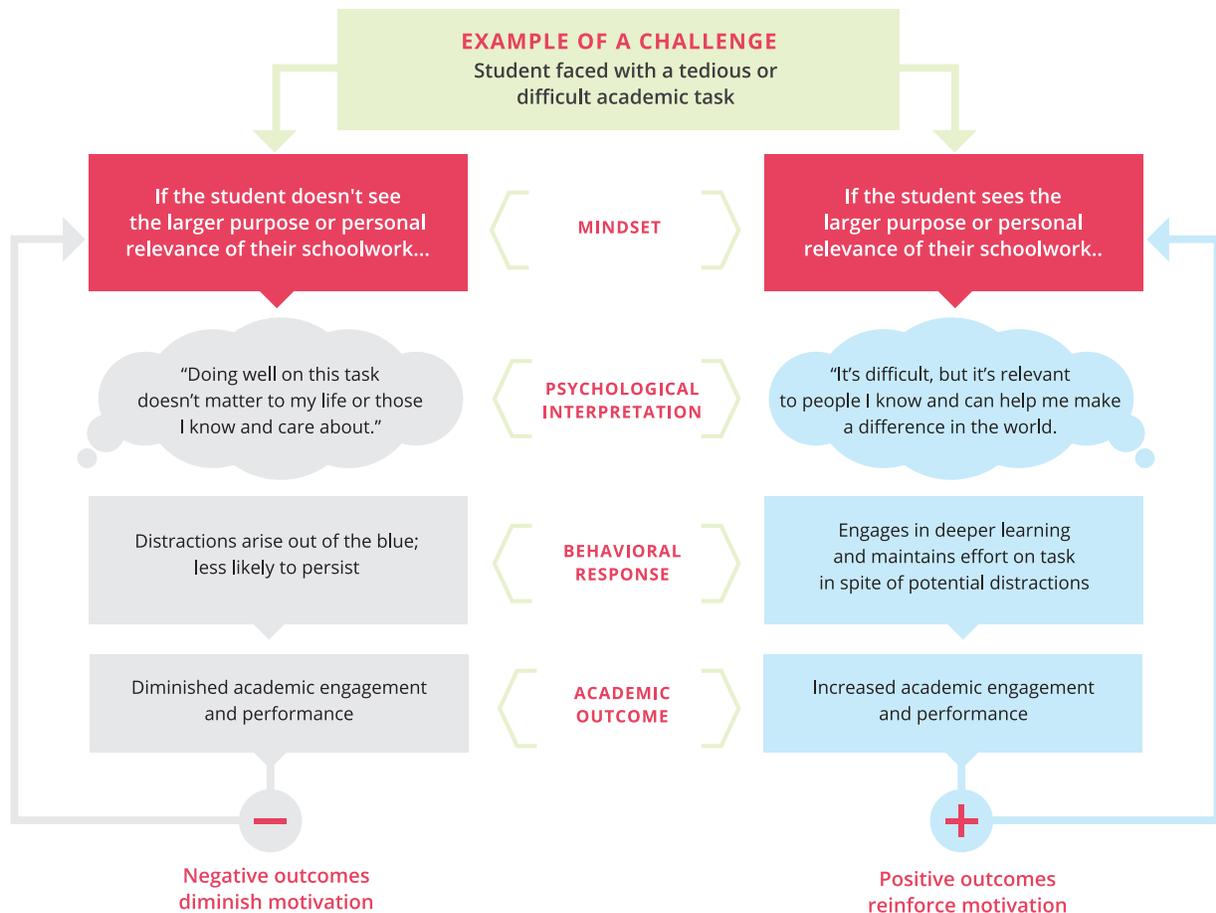
Students value school when they understand how it is related to things they care about and how it can help them reach their long-term goals. Students value their schoolwork when they believe it is relevant to their lives and experiences and/or will help them connect to a purpose that is bigger than themselves—whether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

personally value, such as a **purpose** that is bigger than themselves. When students find learning meaningful and valuable, they show greater interest in their schoolwork, and are better able to “learn deeply.”

Students' perception of the purpose or relevance of their schoolwork shapes their responses to challenges in 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 frustration and learn more deeply

Mastering new content and skills often presents challenges to students or asks them to engage in sustained, deliberate practice, which can sometimes lead to unpleasant emotions like frustration and boredom. 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. Research from psychology shows that if a student sees how their schoolwork can help them understand something personally meaningful, they may be more motivated to persist and remain focused despite distractions.

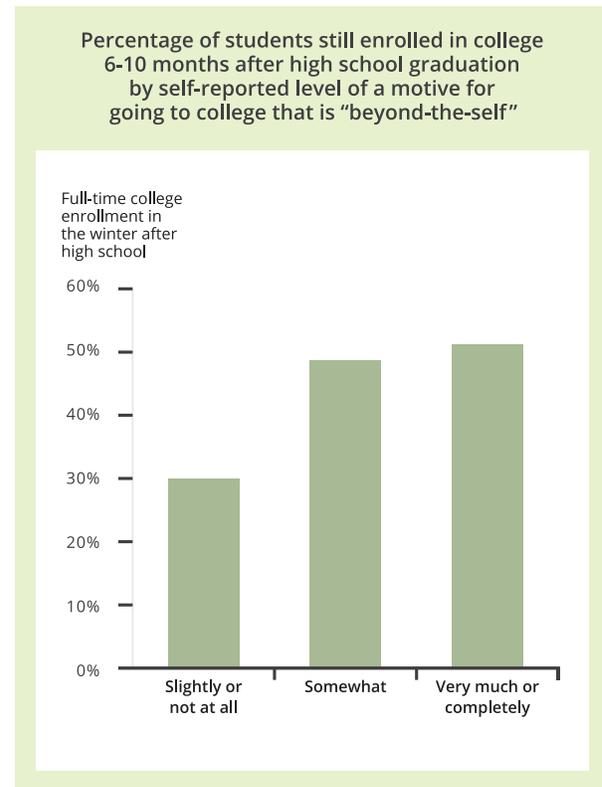
Students who see their cultures reflected in both the course content and the learning process are more likely to be engaged in school

Research on culturally-responsive and -relevant education tells us that learning should reflect the norms, values, social thoughts, and reality of diverse cultures, rather than only legitimizing upper- and middle-class, Eurocentric cultural knowledge.¹ This research underscores the importance of creating cultural continuities in school for all students through curriculum and pedagogy. Latinx adolescents, for example reported feeling more efficacious when their cultural heritage was woven into class content and when Spanish was used in instruction.²

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

Research 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

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

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, controlling for factors like IQ (see Figure 1).³

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

Research across psychology, education, and other disciplines have tested an array of strategies for promoting purpose and relevance in school, ranging from brief psychological exercises to changes to curriculum and pedagogy.

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to their everyday lives or to their long-term goals, especially a larger purpose. These exercises 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.

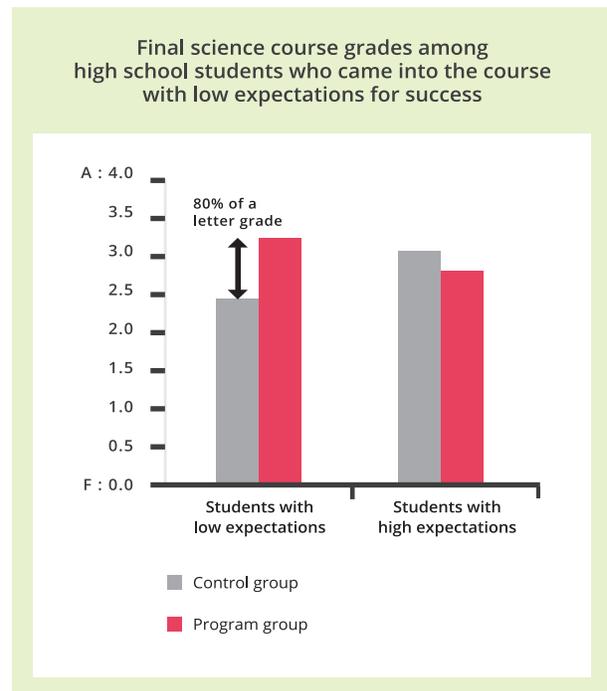
Help students identify the usefulness of coursework in their own lives

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 treatment exercise earned higher grades in their science courses than those in the control group (see Figure 2).⁴ 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 psychological exercise that has improved students' academic achievement in research studies focuses on what researchers call a “purpose for learning.” These exercises 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 exercise earned significantly higher mathematics and science grades than students in the control group.⁵ A similar exercise had a positive effect on community college students' accumulation of credits.⁶

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

Design learning environments that support students' sense of purpose and relevance school

Many schools have adopted models and curricula that are designed to help students see the bigger purpose and relevance of school. Some K-12 models emphasize project-based learning, personalization, and connections to the world beyond school, such as High Tech High and EL Education.

Other models seek to also create cultural continuities for students whose cultures have often been marginalized or excluded in American schools. These include holistic programs like Oakland Unified School District's African American Male Achievement Initiative, as well as specific curricula and coursework. For example, a 9th grade ethnic studies curriculum in San Francisco Unified School District, designed to build students' critical understanding of society and

their place in society, increased 9th grade student attendance by 21% and GPA by 1.4 grade points.⁷ In postsecondary 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. A recent evaluation found that the program increased participation in college level courses, the number of credits earned, and credential attainment.⁸

Research suggests that institutions’ efforts to address issues of relevance should also bear in mind the broader social, cultural, and historical context of education and the messages educators and institutions send students implicitly and explicitly about who belongs in school and to whom school is relevant. For example, disproportionate exclusionary discipline; curricula and instruction that privilege white, middle and upper-class cultural knowledge and legacies while excluding or mischaracterizing the cultural knowledge and legacies of other groups; and practices and policies that fail to meet the needs of or discriminate against students and their families—among other factors—can undermine students’ sense of belonging and relevance, diminishing their connection to school and schoolwork.⁹

In addition to holistic, system-wide initiatives like Oakland’s African American Male Achievement Initiative that seek to address such issues at multiple levels, research suggests institutions should support changes at the classroom level, too. A study of Latinx children in grades 3-5 found that when teachers had a *critical awareness* of the structural barriers faced by students of color and students from families facing economic disadvantage, they were more likely to integrate content from students’ cultures into their classes, and in turn were more likely to use Spanish in class, which was positively associated with students’ year-end mathematics performance.¹⁰

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