



The Good, the Bad, the Engaged, and the Disengaged: An Examination of College Students’ Reported Academic Behaviors

Donald A. Saucier, Ashley A. Schiffer, Noah D. Renken, & Lillian Taylor

Kansas State University

COLLEGE STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

Instructors in higher education invest great efforts to engage their students and support their learning and success. Research reliably shows that students’ levels of intrinsic motivation and academic engagement are associated with better academic outcomes (e.g., Guay, 2022; Handelsman et al., 2005; Linnenbrink & Pintrich, 2002; Svanum & Bigatti, 2009). In addition to student disengagement being associated with poorer academic outcomes (e.g., Brint & Cantwell, 2014), it may also create emotional challenges for both students (Fuller et al., 2020) and their instructors (Fix et al., 2020).

Research has also shown that instructors’ behaviors can be a factor that can serve to motivate or demotivate students (e.g., Gorham & Christophel, 1992; Saucier et al., 2022). Student disengagement may be an intentional choice made by students to reject learning opportunities, particularly in situations in which they feel personally challenged (e.g., their identities or beliefs; Dean & Jolly, 2012). Accordingly, research has examined and promoted ways for instructors to increase their students’ levels of motivation and engagement in class to better support their learning and success (e.g., Bowden, Tickle, & Naumann, 2021; Cheatham, Ozga, St. Peter, Mesches, & Owsiany, 2017; Perry & Penner, 1990; Saucier et al., in press; Tindage & Myers, 2020).

While instructors invest these efforts, it may be that, ultimately, the behaviors of students will serve to promote or hinder their own learning and success. Research to date has examined how various behaviors (e.g., attending class, studying, using active learning, setting goals) positively impact academic performance (e.g., Aydin, 2017; Dollinger et al., 2008; Pirmohamed et al., 2017; Van der Zanden et al., 2018) and has reported on attempts to help college students behave in ways that promote their academic success (e.g., Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Krsmanovic et al., 2020).

STUDY OVERVIEW

We examined college students’ reports of their levels of academic behaviors that are associated with engagement versus disengagement and those that are associated with greater versus lesser degrees of academic success. We examined how reports of these academic behaviors were associated with students’ demographics (i.e., gender identity, age, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, class year), their status as first-generation students, their standardized test scores prior to entering college (i.e., ACT), and their academic performance (i.e., GPA).

We also examined how reports of these academic behaviors were associated with individual differences in college students’ levels of social vigilantism (i.e., individual differences in people’s tendencies to perceive their own beliefs as superior to those of others and to attempt to impress those beliefs onto others; Saucier & Webster, 2010). Research has shown that higher levels of social vigilantism are related to individuals’ resisting persuasion attempts (Saucier & Webster, 2010) and defending their beliefs against challenges (such as by counterarguing; Jacks & Cameron, 2003) across a wide domain of topics (e.g., sex education, climate change, abortion, wearing masks during the COVID-19 pandemic; O’Dea et al., 2018; Raimi & Jongman-Seren, 2020; Raimi & Leary, 2014; Saucier et al., 2021; Saucier & Webster, 2010; Saucier et al., 2014; Schiffer et al., 2023). Research has also shown that higher levels of social vigilantism related to belief superiority and defense even when the beliefs are considered relatively unimportant (Saucier et al., 2014) and do not reflect the possession of greater amounts of information to support those beliefs (Saucier et al., 2021). Further, research has shown social vigilantism is associated with attending closely to information that is contrary to the individuals’ beliefs, apparently for the purpose of rebutting the information and not for considering its value (Miller et al., 2023). We predicted that social vigilantism would be positively associated with behaviors associated with active engagement in class given social vigilantism’s association with holding strong attitudes and beliefs, being willing to speak up in defense of those beliefs, and attending closely even to information that counters one’s beliefs.

For more information, please contact Don Saucier, saucier@ksu.edu

METHOD

Participants

Undergraduate students ($N = 165$) completed our online survey in exchange for research credit for their general psychology courses. The majority were first-year students (61%), women (66%), heterosexual (86), White (79%), and continuing generation college students (76%). Their average age = 19.76 ($SD = 3.13$), their average ACT score = 23.80 ($SD = 3.87$), and their average college GPA = 3.43 ($SD = 0.57$).

Measures

College Student Behaviors

Content matter experts regarding academic behaviors created the measures used to assess college students’ self-reported academic behaviors. This group included college instructors, graduate students, and undergraduate students. Each of the college instructors had won awards for their teaching excellence. Each of the graduate students had completed their master’s degree and had won awards for their excellence as teaching assistants. Each of the undergraduate students had completed at least three semesters of college, and some had served as teaching assistants as well.

The members of the focus group independently brainstormed items that related to each of four different categories of students’ academic behaviors (i.e., Engaged, Disengaged, Success, and Problem behaviors), discussed the initial drafts of items, and created lists of items that broadly represented each category of students’ academic behaviors. We made the a priori decision to use these measures to represent these four categories of academic behaviors provided that each measure demonstrated good internal consistency (i.e., $\alpha > .80$). Our purpose in this study was to maximize the face validity of our measures of academic behaviors in a way that made intuitive sense to college instructors and students.

Participants responded to each item regarding, “How likely are you to do each of the following as a student?” from 1 (*Very Unlikely*) to 9 (*Very Likely*), and we averaged the ratings across the items to create composite scores for each of the four categories of academic behaviors such that higher scores indicated greater levels of that category of academic behavior.

“**Engaged**” academic behaviors (26 items, $\alpha = .85$) indicate active participation in the learning experience (e.g., *Speak up in classroom discussions, Lead my group projects, Attend all of my classes*).

“**Disengaged**” academic behaviors (20 items, $\alpha = .81$) indicate avoidance of participation in the learning experience (e.g., *Avoid answering the instructor’s questions, Wear earbuds/headphones during class, Sit in the back of the classroom*).

“**Success**” academic behaviors (22 items, $\alpha = .90$) referred to behaviors expected to increase the likelihood of academic success (e.g., *Do my class readings ahead of time, Work to understand my class material even when it is difficult, Review the course syllabus*).

“**Problem**” academic behaviors (21 items, $\alpha = .89$) referred to behaviors expected to decrease the likelihood of academic success (e.g., *Skip my classes, Submit my assignments late, Get on my phone while my instructor is talking*).

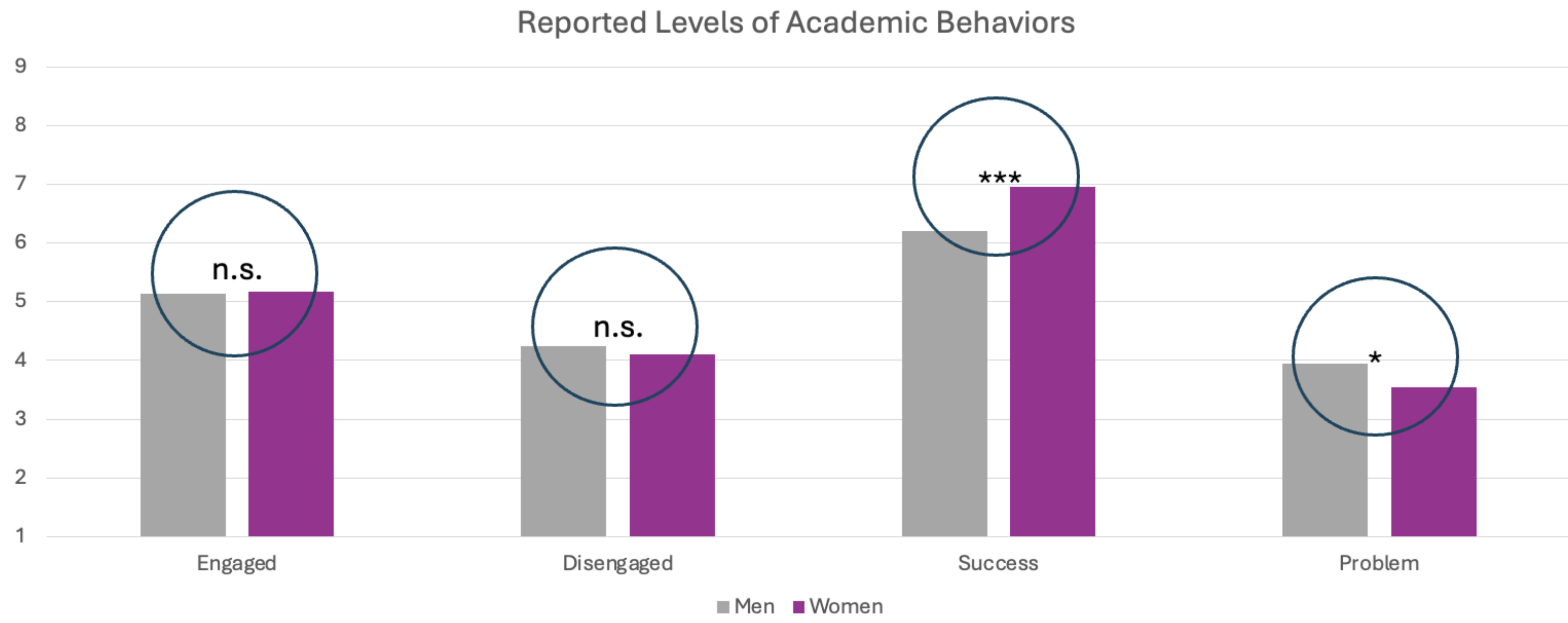
Social Vigilantism

We measured participants’ levels of social vigilantism using the Social Vigilantism Scale (Saucier & Webster, 2010). Participants reported their levels of agreement from 1 (*Strongly Disagree*) to 9 (*Strongly Agree*) for the 14 items (e.g., *I feel as if it is my duty to enlighten other people*). We averaged the ratings across the items to create composite scores ($\alpha = .83$) such that higher scores indicated greater levels of social vigilantism.

Procedure

Undergraduate students signed up for our online study via the online research participation management system as part of their general psychology classes. After providing informed consent, participants completed the measures in counterbalanced and randomized orders. Upon completion, participants read a debriefing statement and were granted research participation credit. All measures and procedures were approved by our university’s Institutional Review Board.

RESULTS: MEAN DIFFERENCES



We used multivariate analyses of variance (MANOVA) to test for gender differences in reported levels of Engaged, Disengaged, Success, and Problem academic behaviors. There were significant differences between men and women in their overall reported levels of Engaged, Disengaged, Success, and Problem academic behaviors as a set of dependent measures, $Wilks' \Lambda = 0.86$, $F(4, 159) = 6.28$, $p < .001$, $partial \eta^2 = .14$. Follow up comparisons revealed that women reported significantly higher levels of Success academic behaviors, $F(1, 162) = 17.48$, $p < .001$, $partial \eta^2 = .10$, and significantly lower levels of Problem academic behaviors, $F(1, 162) = 6.17$, $p = .030$, $partial \eta^2 = .03$, than did men. Men and women did not differ in their reported levels of Engaged, $F(1, 162) = 0.05$, $p = .828$, $partial \eta^2 = .00$, or Disengaged, $F(1, 162) = 0.84$, $p = .361$, $partial \eta^2 = .01$, behaviors.

RESULTS: CORRELATIONS

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for, and the Correlations Among, the Individual Differences and Reported Levels of Students’ Reported Academic Behaviors

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. SV	4.61	1.16	-											
2. Age	19.76	3.13	-.19*	-										
3. Class Year	1.70	1.03	-.03	.47***	-									
4. Gender	0.66	0.47	-.11	-.05	-.02	-								
5. Race/Ethnicity	0.21	0.41	-.02	-.00	.03	.01	-							
6. Orientation	0.12	0.32	.12	-.09	-.05	.12	.06	-						
7. First Gen	0.77	0.42	.05	-.14	-.06	-.13	-.27***	-.16*	-					
8. ACT	23.80	3.87	.13	.05	.14	-.15	.10	-.03	.19*	-				
9. GPA	3.43	0.57	-.05	-.03	.05	.06	-.09	-.11	.07	.24**	-			
10. Engaged	5.17	1.00	.17*	.12	.10	.02	-.03	.06	-.11	.07	.13	-		
11. Disengaged	4.15	1.01	.11	-.13	-.06	-.07	-.15*	.08	.10	.06	-.20*	-.52***	-	
12. Success	6.72	1.15	.02	.15	.16*	.31***	-.02	-.02	-.10	.07	.26***	.54***	-.51***	-
13. Problem	3.67	1.15	.23***	-.09	-.12	-.17*	-.12	.14	.13	-.04	-.27***	-.20*	.61***	-.64***

*Note: *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001. The Social Vigilantism (SV) measure and measures of students’ reported levels of Engaged, Disengaged, Success, and Problem academic behavior were completed using 1 to 9 response scales. Responses were averaged such that higher scores indicated greater levels of the constructs. Class Year was scored as first year = 1, sophomore = 2, junior = 3, and senior = 4. Gender was scored Men = 0, Women = 1. Race/Ethnicity was scored White = 0, Not White = 1. Orientation scored Straight = 0, Not Straight = 1. First Gen was scored as First Generation = 0, Continuing Generation = 1. We dichotomized demographic variables due to low frequencies of participants who reported being in specific categories.*

CONCLUSION

Our study examined college students’ levels of reported academic behaviors. We created face valid and internally consistent measures of Engaged, Disengaged, Success, and Problem academic behaviors. Our participants reported higher levels of Engaged and Success behaviors (versus Disengaged and Problem behaviors). Student demographics (race/ethnicity, sexual orientation) were generally unrelated to their reports of Engaged, Disengaged, Success, and Problem behaviors, but women (versus men) reported higher levels of Success behaviors and lower levels of Problem behaviors, and students’ class year was positively correlated with their reports of Success behaviors. Further, we found that individual differences in social vigilantism were positively correlated with both Engaged and Problem academic behaviors. Our study contributes to the literature examining how students’ engagement and academic behaviors relate to their academic success in college.