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The First-Gen Experience: Trying to Succeed or Trying to Avoid Failure?

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Abstract

A first-generation college student is the first of their family to enter higher education (RTI International, 2019). This study examined whether first-generation college students adopt avoidance goals (i.e., goals focused on avoiding negative outcomes) more often than continuing-generation college students, and how these goals may impact their campus resource utilization. We hypothesized that first-generation college students at UCSB would report less resource utilization compared to continuing-generation students, and that this association is mediated by the strength of their approach goal orientation. For first-generation college students, we expected higher endorsement of avoidance goals and lower endorsement of approach goals, compared to continuing-generation college students. Lastly, we hypothesized that for those with higher agreement towards avoidance goals and lower agreement towards approach goals, these students would utilize fewer campus resources. In our study, generational status was associated with goal orientation and campus resource utilization. However, generational status and goal orientation together did not appear to predict campus resource utilization. Additionally, first-generation college students used significantly more academic resources compared to continuing-generation college students. Future studies should continue to investigate the relationship between generational status, goal orientation, and resource utilization to develop more insight on how to better support minoritized communities.

First-generation college students are identified as “the first in their family to earn a bachelor’s degree from a four-year institution in the United States” (UCSB First-Gen Community, n.d.). The 2015-2016 National Postsecondary Student Aid Study shared that 56% of undergraduate students nationally identified as first-generation, and 59% of these students were also the first of their siblings to attend college (RTI International, 2019). Many colleges emphasize individual academic success, a value that the first-generation community are not familiar with. For example, Stephens et al. (2012) found that administrators of universities endorsed independent norms as a way of encouraging students to discover their own paths and to express themselves as they see fit. However, Latinx first-generation college students often are in conflict with their home values and academic values as their collectivistic backgrounds did not prepare them for the individualistic college environment. From Watson et al. (1998)’s study, individualism emphasizes freedom of choice, assertiveness, and uniqueness while collectivism focuses on social roles and maintaining harmony among a group. Therefore, they struggle with helping their families directly or succeeding in school for the long-term goal of assisting their families later on (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). First-generation college students may differ on variables impacting their success, as collectivistic values instilled from their upbringings contradict the individualistic environments of traditional universities. Consequently, this may negatively impact a student’s sense of belonging, especially if they were unable to help their families (Vasquez-Salgado et al., 2015). From this, the present research is aimed at understanding how a first-generation college student forms goals from their upbringing, and current environment, and how this may impact their campus resource utilization.

Approach and Avoidance Goals

Elliot et al. (2011) defined approach-based goals as those where an individual seeks task completion by remaining positive and fully immersing a committed, open approach while avoidance-based goals are when an individual seeks to avoid failure and is motivated through fear or anxiety. Furthermore, these approach and avoidance goals can be categorized as mastery, performance-approach, or performance-avoidance goals. A performance goal focuses on showing one’s competence relative to others, while a mastery goal demonstrates one’s development of skills towards mastering a task. Overall, those who create mastery or performance-approach goals demonstrate motivation to achieve success and high competence expectancies while those with performance-avoidance goals display fear of failure and low competence expectancies (Elliot & Church, 1997). Additionally, performance-approach goals had a positive relationship with graded performance, whereas performance-avoidance goals were detrimental to both intrinsic motivation and graded performance (Elliot & Church, 1997). Thus, it is vital to consider how and why approach and avoidance goals are created in various situations, and how we can encourage more approach goals.

Why Might Generational Status Influence Goal Adoption?

It is important to first examine how generational status and other related factors may lead to how goals are formed. For instance, it has been shown that students with higher self-efficacy participate more, seek more challenges, and are more persistent than students with lower self-efficacy (Bandura, 1999;

Pajares, 2003; Schunk, 1991). Students who have higher self-efficacy beliefs tend to adopt mastery approach goals, while students who receive poor grades, or are more focused on avoiding looking bad, tend to adopt performance avoidance goals (Hsieh et al., 2007). Oftentimes, this leads students to disregard the importance of reaching out for help. In this case, first-generation students have been found to have lower self-efficacy in their college success compared to continuing-generation students (Ramos-Sanchez & Nichols, 2007; Wohn et al., 2013).

Jury et al. (2015) found that first-generation students tended to adopt avoidance goals; this was driven by the interaction between the level of academic achievement and generational status. In other words, if first-generation students were succeeding academically, they were more likely to adopt avoidance goals. Jury et al. (2015) described upward mobility as leaving one's original background to gain a better social position, and this is often experienced when entering a university to continue one's education. However, first-generation college students encounter challenges such as feelings of incompatibility with the individualistic university values which lead to a decreased sense of belonging. Therefore, they don't benefit as much from upward mobility and instead face identity threats such as stereotype threat of low social-class students succeeding less; this becomes a fear and pressure to succeed (Jury et al., 2015).

A longitudinal study by Durik et al. (2009) demonstrated that performance-avoidance goals and overall GPA had a negative correlation and this relationship could be repeated over many semesters, highlighting a need to assist students to create more approach goals. Church et al. (2001) found that students who perceived a harsh evaluative classroom environment were likely to create performance-avoidance goals and discouraged from adopting mastery goals. From these studies, it is evident that stereotype threats involving identity and goal orientation impact performance for students, especially those co-identifying with minority groups.

Overall, previous studies have shown that first-generation students struggle with the conflict between their upbringings and the individualistic college environment. From finding ways to assist their family to continuing their independent education, they struggle to find a compromise, hence they are more fearful of failure, but are more unlikely to ask for help.

What Is the Impact of Their Goals?

Due to a dissonance with their college environment, first-generation student status is often associated with having fewer interactions with faculty, participating less in classrooms, and asking fewer questions (Soria & Stebleton, 2012). For instance, even as early as middle school, Calarco (2011) found that lower-class and first-generation students typically asked for help only when the teacher was unoccupied and were more patient and less proactive, waiting for offers of help rather than asserting their needs. Because first-generation students are less likely to request help, they may struggle in their academic performance. Harackiewicz et al. (2002) claimed that the college context was often performance oriented, alluding that an individual is demonstrating their competence relative to their classmates, and achievement goals appear to be the stronger and more persistent predictors of outcomes when compared to ability, prior performance, and achievement motivation. By adopting performance-approach goals, students were more likely to achieve optimal motivation that would then foster further academic achievement in their future college courses (Harackiewicz et al., 2002). Harackiewicz et al.

(2002) found that by adopting both mastery and performance-approach goals, students were more likely to achieve success in university by demonstrating both interest and motivation. Although this was a study conducted on freshman and sophomore students and not first-generation college students specifically, these results may indicate success for students generally, especially those from minority backgrounds. In general, by providing first-generation students insight on how their backgrounds matter and introducing and encouraging resource utilization, they may be more likely to create approach goals and have a greater sense of belonging for not only the university, but higher education as a whole.

What Type of Resources Are Helpful?

As noted in previous studies, a student's sense of belonging is positively associated with their academic engagement, so learning communities can enhance academic and social engagement for first-generation students as well as other minority groups (Kuh, 2008). Harackiewicz et al. (2014) found that first-generation students were more likely to succeed in their introductory biology course when exposed to a values affirmation course in which students were allowed to explain why certain values were important to them. This simple exercise allowed for students to express themselves, and first-generation students in the values-affirmation condition (62.3%) were more likely to earn Bs than Cs in their course compared to those in the control condition (41.6%) (Harackiewicz et al., 2014). In another study by Stephens et al. (2014), the researchers found that through a difference-education intervention, first-generation students who attended a panel that highlighted the importance of their background for their college experience had higher GPAs, sought out more college resources, and had overall better adjustment to college life. This indicates that first-generation students may not only benefit from learning communities, but also by hearing other experiences that are similar to their own. Additionally, resources such as academic advising can further instill a student's sense of belonging by better integrating them into the academic community and introducing them to various resources (Swecker et al., 2013). In summary, resources such as community building, panels related to generational identity, and academic advising can assist first-generation college students in their sense of belonging at a university, leading to better academic outcomes.

Gaps in the Literature and the Current Study

Although literature on the first-generation community is growing, current studies have been limited in examining first-generation students over an extended period of time (i.e. more than one quarter/semester) and examining the resources that first-generation students are currently using. For instance, Durik et al. (2009)'s study was one of few that examined students over the course of multiple semesters. Additionally, Soria and Stebleton (2012)'s study gave recommendations on how to enhance students' sense of belonging to university, but did not share what resources these students may have already been using. To address the gaps in the literature, the current study will examine the type of goals that first-generation college students adopt, and whether goal adoption predicts how many and what types of resources these students are using on the UC Santa Barbara (UCSB) campus.

Specifically, the present study strives to answer the question of whether first-generation college students create more approach or avoidance goals, and how this may mediate their usage of campus resources. Participants shared their generational status while filling out demographic questions and then rated how much they agreed with certain approach and avoidance statements. Participants then had the opportunity to share what campus resources they have utilized during their undergraduate education. We have three primary hypotheses that direct our study:

Hypothesis 1: For first-generation college students at UCSB, we expect less resource utilization compared to continuing-generation college students at UCSB, and that this association is mediated by the strength of their approach goal orientation.

Hypothesis 2: For first-generation college students at UCSB, we expect higher levels of endorsement of avoidance goals and lower endorsement of approach goals, compared to continuing-generation college students at UCSB.

Hypothesis 3: For those with higher agreement towards avoidance goals and lower agreement towards approach goals, we expect less utilization of UCSB campus resources compared to those with higher agreement toward approach goals and lower agreement towards avoidance goals. Goal strength is expected to mediate the relationship between generational status and resources.

Methods

Participants

328 undergraduate students (253 female, 73 male, two nonbinary) at UCSB completed Part I of this online study via Qualtrics. Participants were recruited through the university subject pool using the SONA program with no restrictions to class levels or major of study. Participant age ranged from 17 to 36 years old ($M = 19.12$, $SD = 1.8$). All participants volunteered and received 0.5 research credits for their participation. One hundred and five participants from Part I participated in a follow-up survey, for which each participant had a 1 in 50 chance of being selected to receive a \$50 Amazon gift card through a random drawing. Participants' racial identities included Asian ($n = 91$), Hispanic/Latino/Latinx ($n = 75$), Black/African American ($n = 5$), Middle Eastern ($n = 4$), White ($n = 109$), and American Indian ($n = 1$).

Design

We conducted a correlational study design. Our predictor variable was whether participants identify as first-generation college students or not. This was obtained by asking participants for their generational status among the demographic questions. The mediator was the tendency to create approach or avoidance goals based on generational status. Our key dependent variable was the amount of campus resource utilization based on the amount of approach and avoidance goals created.

Measures and Materials

Generational Status. Participants filled out demographic questions, including their age, major, year of study, gender identity, racial identity, generational status, and transfer student status. Generational status was obtained by asking participants whether they are a first-generation college student based on the following definition: “A first-generation student is defined as being the first in their families to graduate from a four-year institution in the United States” (The Center, 2017).

Approach and Avoidance Goals. Participants were asked to rate how well each of the goals in the Achievement Goals Questionnaire (AGQ) described what they do in their everyday behavior (Elliot & Sheldon, 1997). For each item, participants rated how much the item corresponded to their everyday behavior from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*always*). For instance, an approach goal was “Impress others with my accomplishments” and an avoidance goal was “Not let my parents down.” For the approach subscale, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.94 and for the avoidance subscale, Cronbach’s alpha was 0.81. Because of the high positive correlation between approach goals and avoidance goals, $r(298) = .76, p < .001$, we created a single index of goal orientation by subtracting each participant’s avoidance goals score from their approach goals score - higher values indicated relatively more approach-oriented individuals while lower values indicated relatively more avoidance-oriented individuals. See *Appendix* for scale.

Campus Resource Utilization. Participants indicated which UCSB campus resources they have utilized during their time as a student here. From this list, we grouped them into three categories: Academic, Basic Needs, and Community/Campus Life. Examples include academic resources such as College of Letters and Science Academic Advising, basic need resources such as Health and Wellness, and community resources such as the Promise Scholars Program. Additionally, participants had the opportunity to list other utilized resources that were not part of the listed items. See *Appendix* for the full list of resources.

Procedure

The entire study was conducted online via the university’s subject pool that led participants to a Qualtrics survey. This was a two-part study. The first part took place during Winter 2022. Upon consenting, participants were asked demographic questions such as age, major and year of study, gender identity, cultural/ethnic background, generational status, and transfer status. They then were asked to answer questions from the Achievement Goals Questionnaire (AGQ; Elliot & Sheldon, 1997) about their everyday behavior. Lastly, participants were debriefed about the study’s purpose of assessing the correlation between generational status and approach/avoidance goal setting and thanked for their participation.

The second part took place the following quarter, Spring 2022, about a month after Part I. The researchers emailed participants who completed Part I, requesting their participation, and 105 participants completed Part II. In this second part of the study, upon consenting, participants were asked the same demographic questions as in Part I. They then were prompted to indicate which UCSB resources they have utilized (at least once) from a generalized list during their overall time at UCSB. At the end of the survey, participants also had the option to list any additional resources they have utilized that may not have been mentioned in the generalized list. Participants were then debriefed about the

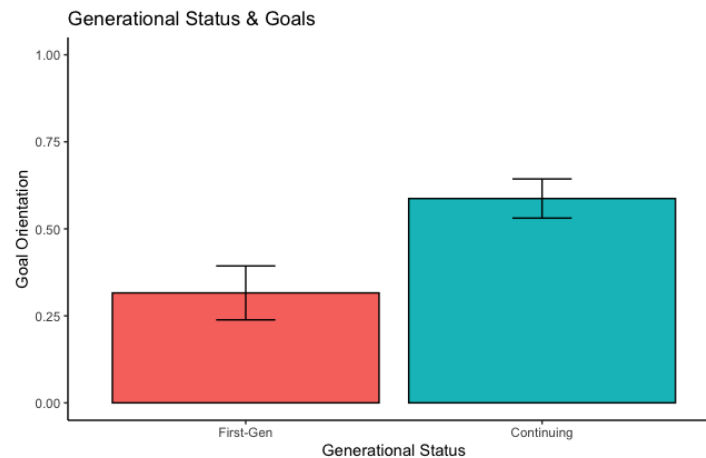
study's purpose of assessing the correlation between generational status and campus resource utilization and thanked for their participation.

Results

We first computed the average approach goals ($M = 5.28$, $SD = 0.77$) and avoidance goals ($M = 4.78$, $SD = 0.65$) for each participant. We then conducted a Pearson's correlation test to assess the relationship between approach goals and avoidance goals, given that prior research suggests they are often highly correlated (Elliot et al., 2006). As expected, they were highly correlated, $r = .76$, $p < .001$, so we used computed difference scores per participant in subsequent analyses. Using the created index score, we conducted a regression analysis to see if generation status predicted goal orientation. Results showed that generation status did significantly predict goal orientation, such that continuing-generation college students had relatively higher approach orientation in their goals compared to first-generation students ($b = .169$, $p = .005$). Thus, although both first-generation and continuing-generation students had relatively more approach goals than avoidance goals (first-generation: $M = 0.39$, $SD = 0.52$; continuing: $M = 0.55$, $SD = 0.48$), being a continuing-generation student led to significantly more approach goals. These results partially support our first hypothesis, in that first-generation college students appear less approach-oriented than continuing-generation college students. It is important to note that on careful examination of the two scales (approach goals and avoidance goals) that made up the index, we found that both groups were relatively more approach-oriented overall (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Approach Orientations of First-Generation & Continuing-Generation Students



We also hypothesized that first-generation students would utilize fewer UCSB campus resources compared to continuing-generation students. Furthermore, we predicted that this effect would be mediated by goal orientation; in other words, if they had a lower score on the index (i.e., relatively less approach motivation), we expected them to use fewer resources. To test this hypothesis, we divided the campus resources into three categories: academic, basic needs, and campus community. From here, we

created frequency scores of how many campus resources each participant had used during their current undergraduate experience thus far and conducted a series of regression analyses.

First, we regressed generational status on academic resources. Contrary to what we predicted, generational status did significantly predict academic resource utilization, however, first-generation college students appear to use **more** academic resources compared to continuing-generation college students ($b = -.89, p = .003$). Contrary to hypotheses, goal orientation was not significantly associated with academic resource use ($b = -.257, p = .437$; see Figure 2). The association between generation status and academic resource use observed in the first equation ($b = -.89$) was reduced ($b = -.744, p = .028$), but the lack of a significant association between goal orientation and academic resource use suggests the absence of a mediation effect (see Figure 3).

Figure 2

Relationship between Goal Orientation & Academic Resource Use

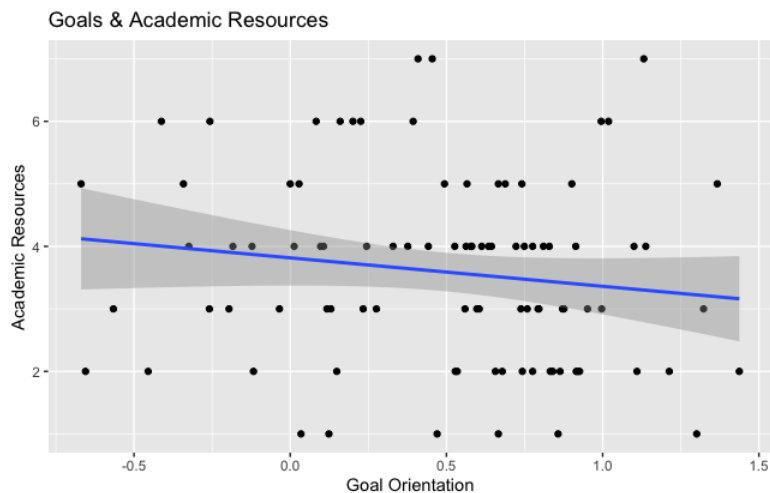
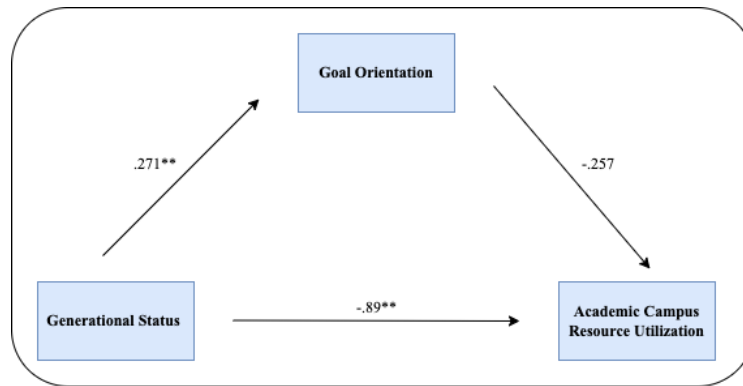


Figure 3

Proposed mediation model of generational status, goal orientation, and academic resource utilization

Note: $**p < .01$



Neither generational status ($b = .094, p = .759$) nor goal orientation ($b = .008, p = .981$) predicted the utilization of basic needs resources. However, generational status had a marginally significant effect on campus life resources ($b = -.332, p = 0.063$). Although this effect was not significant, it does suggest that continuing-generation students might be using less campus life resources compared to first-generation students. However, when combined, generational status ($b = -.197, p = .335$) and goal orientation ($b = -.028, p = .891$) together did not predict the utilization of campus life resources.

Altogether, these results suggest that although first-generation college students appear more avoidant than continuing-generation college students, they appear to utilize academic and campus life resources more rather than less, contrary to what past literature has shown. Furthermore, this effect does not appear to be mediated by goal orientation.

Discussion

The present study contributes to the literature on approach and avoidance goals, and further examines how generational status and goal orientation may be a factor in resource utilization. This study did support some, but not all of our hypotheses.

The first hypothesis predicted that first-generation college students at UCSB would utilize fewer resources compared to continuing-generation college students, and that this would be mediated by the strength of their approach goal orientation. This was not supported as goal orientation did not predict campus resource utilization.

The second hypothesis predicted that first-generation college students would have higher levels of avoidance goals and lower levels of approach goals compared to continuing-generation college students. This was partially supported as first-generation college students did appear to be significantly less approach-oriented than continuing-generation college students.

The third hypothesis predicted that for those with higher agreement towards avoidance goals, we expected less utilization of campus resources at UCSB. This hypothesis was not supported because although first-generation college students did appear more avoidance-oriented, they used significantly more academic resources compared to continuing-generation college students. Additionally, contrary to

what we predicted, goal orientation did not appear to be a significant mediator. From our results, we hypothesize that first-generation college students may utilize more resources compared to continuing-generation college students because they lack knowledge of higher education and possibly have more resources advertised to their community. Additionally, one particular resource, Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships, may have been a confound since first-generation college students often identify as low-income as well. Because of this, we ran the regression analyses without this particular resource, but even then, all patterns of results remained the same. For basic need resources, first-generation college students did not appear to utilize these significantly more or less than continuing-generation college students. In regards to campus life resources, first-generation college students might be utilizing slightly more campus resources than continuing-generation college students. However, these resources may have culture, gender identity, or income acting as confounds. For example, Disabled Students Program (DSP) was listed as a campus life resource, but a student may not be inclined to utilize this resource if they do not identify as having a disability.

In all, our findings suggest that generational status does have an impact on goal orientation and campus resource utilization. This supports past findings that first-generation college students tend to create more avoidance goals because of their generational status and the upward notion of academic achievement (Jury et al., 2015). However, it does not appear that generational status and goal orientation together impact campus resource utilization. In our study, first-generation college students appear more willing to utilize resources, particularly academic, contrary to past literature in which first-generation students were more hesitant to assert their needs (Calarco, 2011). Because they appear to use academic resources significantly more, this can help to increase a sense of belonging to the campus community (Swecker et al., 2013).

However, there were several limitations to our study. Our first caveat was the sample size for Part II of the study. Our sample size for Part I consisted of 328 participants while our sample size for Part II consisted of 105 participants, about one-third of the original sample. Another limitation was the diversity of our sample. Our sample consisted of more continuing-generation college students than first-generation college students. Additionally, our sample included more female-identifying participants and the majority of the sample identified as White.

From an applied perspective, the findings of the present study signal for more intensive research to be conducted on generational status and goal orientation. It also warrants that resource utilization is impacted by one's background and urges for more study on what resources are available and useful to students. Future researchers can resolve our limitations by creating an extended, longitudinal study (i.e. an individual's entire undergraduate education) to recruit more diverse participants and observe whether the patterns we found held across time, similar to Durik et al.'s study (2009). Also, future researchers can look at participants' grade point averages (GPAs) to see the effects of goal orientation and resource utilization as campus resources are typically advertised more to first-generation and transfer students overall. Lastly, Academic Advising can be investigated further by asking students why they use this resource and whether they found it helpful.

In conclusion, our study sheds light on the needs of the first-generation community and the possible resources that may assist in their success. Future studies should continue to investigate the relationship between generational status, goal orientation, and resource utilization. Therefore, we can better understand how one's background impacts the way they create goals and how this affects resource use. This could lead to more developed and appropriate resources for minority communities, and to future generations of students as a whole.

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Appendix

Achievement Goals Questionnaire (AGQ)

The Final Set of Approach and Avoidance Achievement Goals Used in the Achievement Goals Questionnaire (AGQ)

-
- | | |
|---|--|
| 1. try new and challenging activities | 27. accomplish something every day |
| 2. avoid procrastination | 28. avoid being overwhelmed by all I have to do |
| 3. fulfill my potential | 29. avoid feeling insecure about my work |
| 4. avoid doing or saying something stupid | 30. improve my specific talents |
| 5. avoid wasting time | 31. be creative |
| 6. impress others with my accomplishments | 32. avoid doing things I'm not good at |
| 7. avoid worrying about my schoolwork | 33. not set my goals too high |
| 8. make my parents proud of me | 34. avoid settling for mediocrity |
| 9. be efficient | 35. be a good student |
| 10. avoid making mistakes I can't fix | 36. not get behind in my work |
| 11. not let my parents down | 37. finish what I've started |
| 12. write and speak well | 38. excel in sports/extracurricular activities |
| 13. avoid stressful situations | 39. overcome obstacles |
| 14. do better than others | 40. avoid failure |
| 15. fulfill all of my responsibilities | 41. not be late for my appointments |
| 16. avoid getting bad grades | 42. make clear goals for my future |
| 17. be on time for appointments | 43. approach tasks with optimism |
| 18. avoid being such a perfectionist | 44. improve on my weaknesses |
| 19. do things the best I can | 45. avoid situations where my ability is "on the line" |
| 20. get good grades | 46. concentrate on the task at hand |
| 21. learn new things | 47. avoid looking inferior to others |
| 22. avoid being pessimistic | 48. get ahead of schedule in my work |
| 23. perform well in my work | 49. avoid doing poorly in school |
| 24. complete assignments on time | 50. not be lazy |
| 25. motivate myself toward my goals | 51. achieve my goals |
| 26. work hard | |
-

Note. In completing the AGQ, participants read an explanation of the achievement goals concept and then rate how well each of the 51 goals describes what they typically try to do in their everyday behavior on a scale of 1 (*not at all*) to 9 (*perfectly*). Participants also select, in order, the eight goals that they think best represent their achievement pursuits and are provided the option of generating novel achievement goals if they so desire. The temporal focus of the assessment in the AGQ may be left unspecified or may be confined to a specific time period (e.g., a particular semester).

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UCSB Campus Resource List

Academic

1. College of Creative Studies Academic Advising
2. College of Engineering Academic Advising
3. College of Letters and Science Academic Advising
4. Campus Learning Assistance Services (CLAS)
5. Educational Opportunity Programs (EOP)
6. Office of International Students and Scholars (OISS)
7. ONDAS Student Center (OSC)
8. Summer Sessions
9. Transfer Student Center (TSC)
10. UCSB Library
11. Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities (URCA)
12. Career Services
13. Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships

Basic Needs

1. AS Food Bank
2. Basic Needs Resources
3. CalFresh at UCSB
4. Miramar Food Pantry
5. Alcohol and Drug Program (ADP)
6. Campus Advocacy, Resources, and Education (CARE)
7. Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS)
8. Health and Wellness
9. Office of the OMBUDS
10. Recreational Center
11. Student Health
12. Housing, Dining, & Auxiliary Enterprises (i.e. dorms, dining halls)
13. Transportation and Parking Services (TPS)

Campus Life

1. Cultural Resource Centers in SRB (i.e. African diasporic Cultural Resource Center; American Indian and Indigenous Cultural Resource Center; Asian Resource Center; Chicana/Latina Cultural Resource Center; Middle Eastern, North African, South Asian Resource Center)
2. Disabled Students Program (DSP)
3. Dream Scholars/Undocumented Student Services
4. Guardian Scholars Program
5. Multicultural Center
6. Non-traditional Student Resource Center
7. Office of Black Student Development
8. Promise Scholars Program
9. Resource Center for Sexual and Gender Diversity (RCSGD)
10. Veterans and Military Services
11. Women's Center
12. Associated Students (AS)
13. Student Engagement and Leadership (SEAL)