

October 2016

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Tyler Smith

*Northeastern Illinois University*

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### Recommended Citation

Smith, Tyler (2016) "Using Self-Determination Theory to Improve College Access Among Minority Student Populations," *SPACE: Student Perspectives About Civic Engagement*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.nl.edu/space/vol2/iss1/6>

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## **Self-Determination as a Theory and Incentive to Improve College Access Among Minority Student Populations**

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*Tyler Smith, Northeastern Illinois University*

### **Introduction**

Over the past several decades, college aspirations among high school students have reached an all-time high, with over 80% of all eighth graders holding the expectation that they will attend college (Venezia & Kirst, 2005). Even with a majority of all eighth grade students holding the expectation to attend college, there is still a large portion of students who fail to do so. According to Venezia and Jaeger (2013), Hispanic and black students, combined, only make up 27.5% of the college population. In response to this grim statistic, many college preparation programs have been developed with the goal of increasing college attendance among minority students.

The University Center of Lake County (UCLC) in Illinois has been among those engaging in this type of community outreach, by providing a wide range of college preparation programs that aim to motivate and engage students from underrepresented groups. While volunteering with the UCLC, I facilitated many of the outreach events and actively engaged with the students who attended the programs. Throughout my service learning, the three tenets of self-determination theory (SDT) were continually being implemented. The purpose of this paper is to describe the impact that SDT had while I was volunteering with the UCLC.

### **Theoretical Positioning of the Study**

Self-Determination Theory. The social conditions which an individual is exposed to can have a tremendous impact on the thought processes and behavior of that individual (Besancon, Fenouillet, & Shankland, 2015). Subsequently, they can affect the individual's level of motivation, either bolstering motivation, enabling them to become proactive and engaged, or preventing motivation, causing them to become alienated and passive (Ryan & Deci, 2000a). Based upon years of research, Ryan and Deci (2000b) developed self-determination theory (SDT), which proposes that people become motivated by three innate psychological needs: competence, connectedness, and autonomy (Ryan & Deci, 2008). When these three needs are met, it is believed that an individual's level of

motivation increases, and therefore produces positive behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000a).

**Competence.** The Latino Eligibility Study found that the biggest factor preventing Latino students from attending college is a fundamental lack of information on how to prepare for college (Auerbach, 2004). According to the U.S. Department of Education (n.d.), college access and subsequent success in college is largely determined by the quality of education one receives throughout primary and secondary schooling. Students from low-income neighborhoods typically do not receive the same quality of education that students living in middle- to upper-class neighborhoods receive (Gullat & Jan, 2003). Students living in more affluent neighborhoods often receive more rigorous academic preparation, which includes curriculum that mirrors college coursework (King, 1996). In contrast, low-income communities lack the curriculum and academic development programs that prepare their students for college (Ryan, 2016), which has a tremendous impact on future college enrollment (Gullat & Jan, 2003). On the other hand, when students are equipped with the necessary skills to stay on the path to college, their chances of attending increase significantly (Klasik, 2012).

**Connectedness.** Feeling as though one is part of a community, by building social resources, often influences collective action (Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013), which in this case is college enrollment. Ryan and Deci (2000a) believe that a sense of connectedness in an academic setting greatly impacts motivation, enabling the drive to build stronger and more effective skills to break the barrier of college access.

In many high schools that are located in low-income communities, college-related resources are often limited (Gonzalez, Stoner, & Jovel, 2003), resulting in few opportunities for obtaining information about college from the school faculty. The reason for there being such little interaction between the two is high student–faculty ratios (Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013). As a result, students are forced to seek college-related information elsewhere. One of the most common college-related social resources is parents, with research indicating that the main difference between students who enroll in college and those who do not is parental involvement (Yan, 1999). This poses a problem for first-generation college students because their parents rarely have an understanding of what is needed to prepare for college, or what to expect once the student enters college.

**Autonomy.** When analyzing the effects of one college access program that promoted autonomy, it was found that students who developed a sense of self-efficacy and maintained feelings of autonomy were twice as likely to attend college. Furthermore, Vuong, Brown-Welty, and Tracz (2010) found that when students relied on and believed in themselves, their academic performance increased significantly. This research demonstrated that an internal drive (i.e., wanting) to attend college has significant effects on subsequent enrollment. A possible explanation is that students who are internally motivated to attend college tend to build stronger relationships with college-related social resources (Stephan & Rosenbaum, 2013). This not only provides those students with adequate information on how to attend college, but it allows for the development of a community of like-minded individuals (Rumala, Hidary, Ewool, Emdin, & Scovell, 2011). As indicated by the previously described studies, developing a sense of autonomy can have strong effects on behavior and in many instances contribute towards an individual's

level of motivation.

Previous research concerning student motivation has found that motivation is increased when students are given feedback (competence), when they feel as though they belong in a group (connectedness), and when they are allowed to explore and take initiative (autonomy) (Hoffman & Field, 1995). Based upon these findings, it seems highly plausible that applying SDT to programs designed to promote college preparation and attendance among minority students will bolster their motivation to attend college.

### **Description of the Project and Its Findings**

While volunteering with the UCLC, I participated in several community outreach events. The first event was the Taste of College (TOC), which brought eighth grade students from underrepresented cities into a college environment where the event organizers hoped to invoke a sense of curiosity for college. For this event, I helped create an activity for the students to complete, which was later presented to the other students. The second event was the Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU) College Fair, which brought historically black colleges and universities into Lake County to speak with students from the surrounding community about college. During this event, I spoke with students about the college admissions process along with what would be expected of them once they entered college. The last event was Real Deal: Life 101, which allowed the students to play an interactive Game of Life where they were able to experience the effects of life with and without a college education. I played the role of College, in which I informed the students about the necessary steps they needed to take in order to gain admission into college, as well as answer any other college-related questions.

During my experience with the UCLC, there were many themes that emerged:

- Creating a positive environment where the students who participated in the events could feel empowered and comfortable was vital to the outcome of the events.
- Allowing students to feel as though they were a part of a community gave the students a feeling of connectedness with their environment.
- Maintaining objectivity and being sensitive to the students' circumstances was crucial when working with individuals from low-income communities.
- Creating a sense of autonomy within the students was vital to their overall engagement with the activities.

### **Creating a Positive Environment**

When the students first arrived at the TOC event, it was observed that the middle school students were hesitant to interact with their environment, which was most likely

due to them being placed in an unfamiliar environment. In order to alleviate their stress, the UCLC staff created an atmosphere that encouraged interaction within the classroom. For example, the sign-up sheets for the careers they would be researching were scattered throughout the room, compelling them to actively engage with both the room and with other students. In addition, once the students formed their groups and began working on their PowerPoint presentations, it was observed that the ones who were in a group where they did not know the other members were far less likely to interact with one another. When this was observed, I began closely monitoring the group and then intervened by initiating interaction between all members. This was achieved by asking them questions about the content of their research, requiring each student to answer the question and then follow it up with a group discussion. Based upon this experience, I developed an understanding that creating an environment where students felt comfortable was not only important, but necessary in getting the students more involved in the activity. Moreover, it was observed that in order to maintain a positive environment, I needed to continually monitor and facilitate the activity in which the students were participating.

### **Encouraging Feelings of Connectedness**

It was also observed that during the TOC event, when the students interacted with each other and participation was equal throughout the group, a sense of connectedness developed. When interaction was high, the students were able to complete their activity in a fast period of time, while developing a high quality PowerPoint. Moreover, the students were only given a short period of time to complete their PowerPoint, making teamwork imperative to the completion of their activity.

Developing a sense of connectedness was also recognized as being important while I was volunteering at the HBCU College Fair. The overarching theme of the HBCU College Fair was that developing a sense of connectedness with black high school students was key to boosting motivation for those students to attend college. It was observed that the black students were more comfortable speaking with college representatives that shared the same ethnicity. Based on this observation, an understanding developed that in circumstances where students are placed in a new and stressful environment, being around people similar to themselves may positively influence behavior. In this event, it became apparent that because the students were around people like themselves, they became more comfortable interacting with the college representatives, which led to them obtaining more information from them.

### **Maintaining Objectivity and Developing Both Cultural Sensitivity and Sensitivity to the Students' Circumstances**

For all of the events, maintaining objectivity was an integral part in getting the most out of each student. In many instances, it was observed that I was giving more attention to students who I perceived as sharing many of the same characteristics as myself. After this realization, corrective action was taken immediately, making self-observation key to me participating more fully in each interaction and with a larger number of students. Furthermore, providing every student with equal attention allowed for all of their questions to be answered, making them feel as if no one was left out.

In addition, during the Real Deal: Life 101 event, one of the Hispanic students

spoke about the hardships he experienced. He explained that he had migrated to the United States at a young age, that both of his parents had died, forcing him to have to live with acquaintances of the family, and that he was also held back for two years of school. Based on the interaction with the student, I developed an understanding that there is not one uniform way of working with all students. When working with this population, the circumstances that they have been exposed to need to be taken into consideration. Showing that sensitivity to personal circumstances was critical to having successful experiences with the students. Furthermore, it was equally important to portray the college atmosphere as one that promotes autonomy.

### **Promoting Students' Feelings of Personal Autonomy**

During the Real Deal: Life 101 event, the students were given the freedom to choose which stations they visited and in what order (e.g., College, Housing), and when they were engaging in conversation with me, they were allowed to control the direction of the conversation. I took the initiative in starting the conversation by asking them what college they wanted to attend, but after the initial question the students controlled the direction of the conversation. During these experiences, it was noted that dialogue between the students was much longer in duration when the students were allowed to control the conversation. They also appeared more satisfied when they spoke about things they were interested in. The quality of dialogue provided great insight into the needs of the students, and it also allowed for me to see the importance of providing the students with the feeling that they were in control.

### **Discussion of the Findings and Conclusions**

The implementation of SDT while volunteering with the UCLC was instrumental in bettering the students' experiences. Each concept from SDT was essential in developing each one of the themes, which contributed to developing a more thorough understanding of the students, along with an understanding of what was required to provide them with a better and more comfortable learning experience. Moreover, the themes that developed throughout the service learning evolved into tactics that I used to enhance each one of the events. Based upon the observations made during each event, the use of SDT was believed to be successful.

Owing to the fact that there has been an enormous amount of research suggesting that environmental factors play a significant role in one's motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000a), a majority of the themes were centered in that belief. Arbona and Nora (2007) described how a student's environment plays a considerable role in their academic achievement, showing that their surroundings can largely impact college attainment. Based upon findings such as these, the idea that creating a positive space for the students was a top priority. Furthermore, it was largely believed that in order to provide a more useful experience, the students also needed to maintain a sense of autonomy and feelings of competence (Hoffman & Field, 1995). Developing and maintaining autonomy and feelings of competence not only increases self-reliance and self-governance, but it also plays an important role in the students' commitment to their decisions (Cullaty, 2011). When each one of those "needs" (Ryan & Deci, 2000b) was addressed, it was believed that they contributed to the students' overall enjoyment of each event and also to the possibility of increased motivation to attend college.

Overall, applying the principles of SDT at the TOC event, the HBCU College Fair, and the Real Deal: Life 101 event was positive, and based upon the observations made on-site, its use contributed to the effectiveness of each event. Furthermore, using SDT allowed me to develop a deeper understanding of the needs of each one of the students. As a result, it is believed that its use in similar programs would provide beneficial results. Therefore, my experiences should be drawn upon during future studies and should be used as a tool to enhance other college preparation programs.

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