

## **Demographic and psychographic variables and the effect on online student success**

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### **ABSTRACT**

As online education continues to become an important course delivery system, educators increase attention toward the efficacy of the system and examine factors that inhibit or enhance student success. In addition to measuring numbers of students who enroll in online courses or entire programs, studies examining student performance provide greater insight in developing best practices in higher education. More and more studies now examine the role of psychological factors and their impact on student success. The authors of this study researched key psychological variables including age, hope and self-efficacy as they might impact the number of courses taken and grade performance.

Keywords: Online education, psychographic variables, hope, self-efficacy, grade performance

## INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of the Internet, educators leveraged the new technology not simply for research or to market their institution, but as a means to deliver courses and even entire degree programs electronically while breaking down barriers of time and distance that might otherwise prevent students from enrolling or persisting to graduation. Despite additional technological advances, Internet technology changes the traditional student-teacher relationship from personalized attention to “just another number”. The efficiency of Internet technology potentially could be less effective than the traditional classroom.

Researchers (Brunner, 1991; Fan & Chen, 1997; Hayes and Richardson, 1995; Sullivan, 2001) began to examine demographic characteristics such as gender, age, race and income as they relate to student success. Some of these studies occurred before the advent of online education.

As educators expand the use of technology to deliver academic courses and become more experienced in measuring and understanding online student performance, emphasis now focuses on student success factors. Researchers such as Chemers, Watson, & May, (2000); Gagne & Shepherd, (2001) and Gillham, (2000) examined the psychological construct of hope and how hope might impact student performance. Other researchers, such as Bandura & Locke, (2003) studied the importance of student self efficacy. As more of these studies emerge, educators might develop a greater understanding of online education and how educators and their institutions can develop policies and processes to enhance, rather than inhibit student success.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Self Efficacy

Self efficacy involves the confidence in achieving personal/professional goals. Self efficacy could be a significant factor in increasing academic success in a multitude of academic institutions (Bressler & Bressler, 2007). Bandura & Adams (2005) concurred and in a recent study noted self efficacy to be an accurate predictor of behavior change and performance in organizations. Okech & Harrington (2002) believed that self efficacy could also be a considerable predictor to perform well in various academic achievement areas.

Yukselturk & Bulut (2007) indicated that levels of self efficacy and student anxiety could affect a student’s overall academic performance. Self Efficacy will sometimes be known to mediate anxiety arousal which could aid a student in achieving course objectives (Bandura & Adams, 2005). Bressler & Bressler, (2007) believed that a higher self efficacy may also increase online problem-solving abilities which could be applicable to research efforts with AIS courses offered in online format (Bressler, Bressler, & Bressler, 2009). Wang, Ertmer, & Newby (2004) found that more visual online learning experiences will increase student success with utilizing integrating technology in their classes..

An increased self efficacy in technology integration may bolster student confidence in utilizing computer software, online assignments, and online curriculum/electronic delivery (Wang, Ertmer, & Newby, 2004). However, negative self efficacy causality could disgruntle a student and cause a student to fail in their personal or professional endeavors (Bandura & Locke, 2003). Thus, students may face vulnerability of stress and depression which may negatively impact academic achievement. Fortunately, an incorporation of technology using various

academic format settings could enhance a student's self efficacy and result in successful endeavors while taking courses in online formats.

## **Hope**

Literature integrated within areas of psychiatry and psychology first introduced hope during the 1950's (Harackiewicz, Tauer & Elliot, 2000; Harber & Schneider, 2005; Magaletta & Oliver, 1999). Hope can be a perceived capability to derive pathways to desired goals. (Snyder, 2002; Gilham, 2000). People generate these pathways to meet and exceed goal expectations. Hope theory begins with viewing personal/professional goals as an essential organizational component of behavior. (Ciarrocchi & Deneke, 2006). Additionally, hope can also be identified as a cognitive strategy to meet and exceed personal goals (Gillham, 2000; Snyder, 1994; Snyder, Rand & Signom, 2002; Kramer & Conoley, 1992). Simmons et al., (2003) noted that hope reveals a beneficial feeling that produces an anticipated benefit from individual or group circumstances.

Hope divulges cognitive and affective areas of positive feelings (Gillham, 2000; Juntunen & Wettersten, 2006; Tierney, 1995; Youssef, & Luthans, 2009). Cognitive areas may be applicable to students' ability to assess their interpersonal aptitude. The affective component might engross interrelated negative and positive consequences which may involve feelings from academic accomplishment or failure. The cognitive component may delineate student ambitions regarding their personal goals/achievement.

Hope may sometimes be composed of a variety of barriers, emotions, and stressor types. (Dill & Henley, 1998; Gillham, 2000). Hope can be classified a paradigm of emotional intelligence, which individuals build up overtime to surmount certain stressors (Gillham, 2000). Organizations involve a range of stressors in a personal or professional environment. People categorize conditions as nerve-racking when hurdles obstruct their personal goal endeavors (Snyder, et al, 1991).

Hope also entails personal capability belief to carry out their goals (Snyder et al., 2002). Students with elevated hope might display a more potent propensity to reach their goals; whereas students with a dismal hope may resist developing efficient coping strategies. Luthans (2002) noted that people need to generate hope and positive thinking to overcome personal and professional obstacles. A positive approach emphasizing hope may be more productive than concentrating on the weaknesses.

Persons with a strong emphasis on hope might be more willing to intermingle with colleagues whom they do not have common interests (Snyder et al., 2002). Additionally, people with strong levels of hope communicate positively and can be valuable for leaders in organizations including both colleges and businesses. Research suggests hopeful organizations will most likely result in higher employee retention rates than organizations with employees with lower levels of hope (Pekrun & Maier, 2006; Snyder et al., 2002).

## **Self Efficacy and Hope**

Limited research focuses on the relationship between self efficacy and hope. However, Snyder (2002) noted that hope can be compared to learned self efficacy and can attribute to successful outcomes in academics, health, and work endeavors. Carifio and Rhodes (2002) indicated that construct validities and relationships existed between hope and self efficacy.

Recent studies demonstrate that other factors could increase student self efficacy and hope using a positive active life approach around online classes (Gieck & Olsen, 2007). Occasionally taking an exercise break, such as a short walk and keeping an active lifestyle can help boost a student's self efficacy and hope in the classroom. Hrinda (2008) found factors such as hope, self efficacy, and optimism can be effective when inspiring people to accomplish daily tasks. Therefore, instructors can help influence hope and self efficacy in a student's learning environment to help produce higher levels of student achievement.

## **Optimism**

Optimism is defined as an expectation that an individual/organization will most likely experience positive outcomes (Gillham, 2000). Optimism may be a significant contributor for conduct and might motivate a person to persevere in achieving challenging goals (Chemers, Watson, & May, 2000; Gagne & Shepherd, 2001; Gillham, 2000). Optimism may also be an effective emotional tool when students experience workload constraints, for example when students enroll in distance learning courses while balancing work and other responsibilities.

Optimism can also be applied to career and educational aspirations. According to El-Anzi (2005), optimism can be related to a person's work and/or personal goals. An optimistic and confident student may believe that college achievement makes education a positive experience. Pessimism; however, can be connected with meager goal success. Pessimistic people tend to possess the tendency demonstrate self-defeating demeanor which hinders their goal pursuits (Carver & Scheier, 2002). In reality, pessimists' actions may lead to personal depression, drug abuse, and even suicide when confronting life's challenges.

However, optimists might not always possess an advantage. Occasionally, dilemmas occur where a person can be optimistic but not realistic. Consequently, the individual might overrate the capability to alleviate an unfavorable situation or occurrence (Carver & Scheier, 2002). Pessimists can foresee unfavorable situations, though some optimists might not be able to handle possible distressing events. In contrast, optimists tend to handle diverse circumstances better during difficult times (Carver & Scheier, 2002). This phenomenon suggests that optimistic students may persist to completing a degree program better than a pessimist.

## **Hope and Optimism**

Bruininks & Malle (2006) indicated that hope and optimism consist of similar positive constructs and previous studies support the relationship of hope and optimism (Bressler, Bressler & Bressler, 2008). Bressler, Bressler & Bressler (2009) found that hope and optimism consisted of a strong relationship. However, the two positive psychological variables differ in that hope is a desire while optimism is an expectation. Hope represents more important but less likely outcomes and allows less personal control. Bryant & Cvenegros (2004), while contrasting optimism and hope, experienced difficulties in discerning these variables as they may be utilized interchangeably (Magaletta & Oliver, 1999). Consequently, a measurement that distinguishes these two constructs should consider both characteristics reflecting the identical construct. (Bruininks & Malle; Snyder, Rand & Signom, 2002).

Other studies, (Smith & Hoy, 2007; Hogan, 1997; Hoskins & Newstead, 1997; Huston, 1997) stated that variables such self efficacy, hope, and optimism may affect levels of achievement among students. Bruininks & Malle (2006) noted the similarities of hope, optimism,

and other positive variables existing in an academic setting. Despite supplementary research of accounting distance learning formats (Gagne & Shepherd, 2001); sparse research studies exist with pertaining to student hope integrated with self efficacy while registered in online Accounting Information Systems classes (Dunbar, 2004; Vamosi, Pierce & Slotkin, 2004; Williams, 2003). Fortunately, interventions could be made in helping students achieve academic performance by integrating self efficacy, hope, optimism, and grade performance with diverse online or traditional class format. This could be particularly important for student advisors attempting to help students choose the right type of AIS course delivery to meet students' specific needs (Bressler, Bressler, & Bressler, 2009).

In order to develop a better understanding of certain psychological factors which could impact student success in an online learning environment, the researchers formulated several hypotheses.

*Hypothesis 1-Self Efficacy and the number of online courses taken are positively correlated.*

*Hypothesis 2-Grade performance and Age are positively correlated.*

*Hypothesis 3-Self Efficacy and hope are not related.*

*Hypothesis 4-Optimism and grade performance are not related.*

## METHOD

The researchers surveyed students enrolled in Accounting Information Systems (AIS) courses at the University of Houston, Texas. The sample included undergraduates and post-Bac students enrolled in AIS courses. Two hundred thirty-two questionnaires completed yielded 219 utilizable surveys and provided a 94% response rate.

Questionnaire results revealed a diverse pool of students. Respondent ethnicity comprised of Hispanic ( $n = 44$ ), Pacific Islander ( $n = 5$ ), Asian ( $n = 33$ ), African American ( $n = 49$ ), American Indian ( $n = 2$ ), Caucasian ( $n = 77$ ), Mixed ( $n = 4$ ), and other ( $n = 5$ ). Student age consisted of a wide-range age from 20-55, with an average age of 31. Respondent gender comprised of male ( $n = 49$ ) and female ( $n = 170$ ) students. Additionally, the research study also contained 161 respondents completing a 4-year degree and 51 students who had already completed an undergraduate degree.

The first hypothesis tested whether there is a relationship between self-efficacy and the number of online courses in which a student has taken. The researchers used a Pearson Correlation to uncover a possible relationship between self efficacy and the number of online courses among the participants. Results of the correlation analysis found a negative relationship between self efficacy and the number of online courses. A comparison between the two variables resulted in a significant positive relationship  $r(219) = -.14, p > .0$  with correlation significant at the .05 level (See Table 5).

Hypothesis 2 sought to determine whether grade performance and age are positively correlated. Correlation analysis measured the relationship between grade performance and age among the participants. Statistical analysis demonstrated a positive relationship between grade performance and age. A comparison between the two variables resulted in a significant positive relationship,  $r(219) = .25, p < .05$  (See Table 6).

With Hypothesis 3, the researchers believed self-efficacy and hope are not related. The authors used correlation analysis to measure and analyze self efficacy and hope among the

participants. A comparison between the two variables showed no significant positive relationship,  $r(219) = -.09, p > .05$  (See Table 7).

In Hypothesis 3, the researchers also sought to confirm that optimism and grade performance are not related. The researchers used a correlation analysis to measure academic optimism and grade performance among the participants. A comparison between the two variables showed no significant positive relationship.  $r(219) = -.13, p > .05$  (See Table 8).

## DISCUSSION

The first hypothesis tested whether a significant relationship between grade performance and age existed, which indicated that an age maturity may also significantly improve students' academic performance. An older student might possess more experience in the work force, daily activities, and school. The researchers found a significant positive relationship between grade performance and age.

The second hypothesis tested whether a significant relationship between self efficacy and the number of online courses taken. The authors found a positive relationship between self efficacy and the number of online courses taken, which may imply that students' confidence in online courses could be related to the number of courses taken. The researchers found a significant positive relationship between self efficacy and the number of online courses taken.

Statistical results from hypothesis 3 found self-efficacy and hope are not related. Hypothesis 4 results found optimism and grade performance are not related. These findings confirmed what the researchers believed to be the case based upon their online teaching experience.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This study was limited to students at only one university and focused only on students enrolled in online Accounting Information Systems courses. In addition, respondents to this study reside in an urban setting and more than 75% were female. Older female students could be more likely feel pressured from family and work responsibilities. Students at this university are also commuter students, many of whom are considered nontraditional and more likely to be working or working more hours than residential students. Therefore, studies conducted at other universities or with students studying other courses could likely yield different results.

Although researchers did not find significance when examining hope or academic optimism, the researchers report significance regarding age and self-efficacy. Although age may come as no surprise to some educators, one must consider that older students often carry additional responsibilities of marriage, family and work. Younger students might work fewer hours and be able to focus more time and energy to their academic endeavors. As age was found to be significant, universities could consider recruiting older students to serve as mentors to younger students.

Self-efficacy may be a factor that educators can more easily leverage. Educators may be able to identify early those students with low self-efficacy and develop methods to increase student confidence. This could be achieved by developing recognition systems at points throughout the course or academic program, rather than the more typical approach of recognizing students at graduation.

As colleges and universities continue to develop online courses and programs, the need to better understand factors that contribute to student success becomes increasingly important. Developing an effective response meet to this challenge will require educators to identify those factors which might increase student success.

Research studies continue to uncover the importance of psychological factors as they relate to online students. Therefore, the impact of self-efficacy on academic success cannot be overlooked. Researchers should continue studying psychological constructs and demographic factors in order to develop more effective strategies which could improve student success, especially for students enrolled in online courses.

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**Appendix**

Table 1-descriptive statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Gender	219	1.00	5.00	1.7900	.47089
Marital Status	219	1.00	31.00	1.7534	2.05730
Age	219	.00	55.00	29.5388	9.21666
Size of Household	219	.00	6.00	2.9498	1.36544
Income	219	.00	5.00	3.8311	1.34224
Place of Residence	219	1.00	13.00	2.0411	1.66814
Employment Category	219	1.00	13.00	6.8767	4.84894
Education	219	.00	18.00	4.6621	2.23504
Possess Bachelor's Degree?	219	1.00	7.00	1.3516	.83481
Employment Status	219	1.00	8.00	3.5982	2.03258
Race	219	1.00	8.00	4.6530	2.03143
# of Online Courses	219	.00	15.00	3.5571	2.67509
Hope	219	74.00	188.00	131.5114	14.90839
Self Efficacy	219	14.00	33.00	22.0868	3.42505
Grade	219	1.00	5.00	4.3744	.75813
Optimism	219	20.00	50.00	32.9543	3.79373
Valid N (list wise)	219				

Table 2-number of enrolled online courses

Research

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	0	13	5.9	5.9	5.9
	1	38	17.4	17.4	23.3
	2	42	19.2	19.2	42.5
	3	33	15.1	15.1	57.5
	4	30	13.7	13.7	71.2
	5	16	7.3	7.3	78.5
	6	20	9.1	9.1	87.7
	7	11	5.0	5.0	92.7
	8	6	2.7	2.7	95.4
	9	1	.5	.5	95.9
	10	3	1.4	1.4	97.3
	11	2	.9	.9	98.2
	12	2	.9	.9	99.1
	13	1	.5	.5	99.5
	15	1	.5	.5	100.0
	Total	219	100.0	100.0	

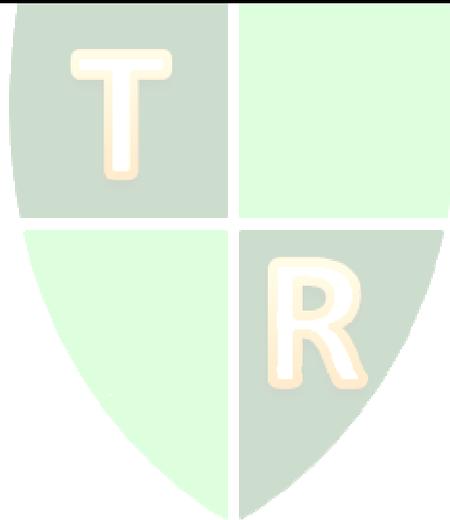


Table 3-student grade performance

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	F	1	.5	.5	.5
	D	3	1.4	1.4	1.8
	C	22	10.0	10.0	11.9
	B	80	36.5	36.5	48.4
	A	113	51.6	51.6	100.0
	Total	219	100.0	100.0	

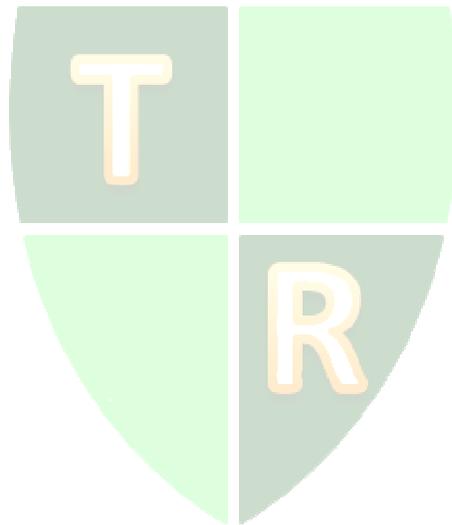


Table 4-age of student

Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid			
3	1.4	1.4	1.4
3	1.4	1.4	2.7
8	3.7	3.7	6.4
17	7.8	7.8	14.2
17	7.8	7.8	21.9
13	5.9	5.9	27.9
17	7.8	7.8	35.6
17	7.8	7.8	43.4
7	3.2	3.2	46.6
10	4.6	4.6	51.1
22	10	10	61.2
11	5	5	66.2
5	2.3	2.3	68.5
7	3.2	3.2	71.7
7	3.2	3.2	74.9
8	3.7	3.7	78.5
5	2.3	2.3	80.8
6	2.7	2.7	83.6
4	1.8	1.8	85.4
3	1.4	1.4	86.8
5	2.3	2.3	89
1	0.5	0.5	89.5
3	1.4	1.4	90.9
1	0.5	0.5	91.3
4	1.8	1.8	93.2
3	1.4	1.4	94.5
2	0.9	0.9	95.4
4	1.8	1.8	97.3
3	1.4	1.4	98.6
1	0.5	0.5	99.1
2	0.9	0.9	100
219	100	100	

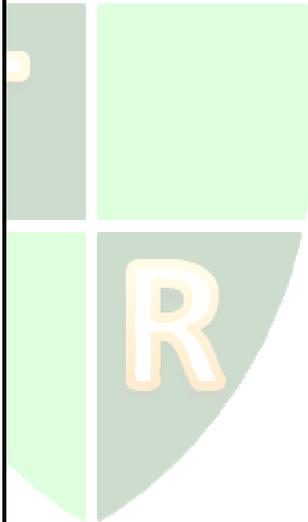


Table 5-Hypothesis 1 statistical results

Self Efficacy	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.144*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.034
	N	219.000	218
# of Online Courses	Pearson Correlation	-.144*	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.034	
	N	218	218.000

\*. Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 6-Hypothesis 2 statistical results

		Grade	Age
Grade	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.253**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	219.000	219
Age	Pearson Correlation	.253**	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	219	219.000

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

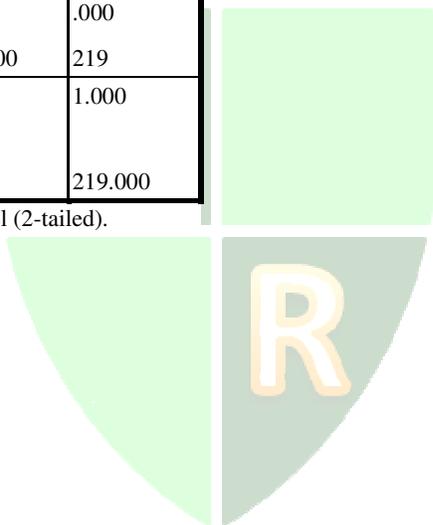


Table 7-Hypothesis 3 statistical results

		Self Efficacy	Hope
Self Efficacy	Pearson Correlation	1.000	.089
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.189
	N	219.000	219
Hope	Pearson Correlation	.089	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.189	
	N	219	219.000

Table 8-Hypothesis 4 statistical results

		Grade	Optimism
Grade	Pearson Correlation	1.000	-.131
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.053
	N	219.000	219
Optimism	Pearson Correlation	-.131	1.000
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.053	
	N	219	219.000

