

LIGHTING A FIRE: START IGNITING STUDENT MOTIVATION

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This paper asserts that accounting students' motivation is malleable and greatly influenced, both positively and negatively, by professor actions. It suggests professors make both intentional and inadvertent choices which influence behaviors and shape classroom motivation. Expectancy theory (Vroom, 1964) provides a framework and offers insight into specific actions professors can take (or halt) to increase student motivation and performance.

EXPECTANCY THEORY - BACKGROUND

Early expectancy theory models (Vroom, 1964; Lawler, 1971; Porter & Lawler, 1968) describe it as a cognitive theory of motivation which assumes that individuals make deliberate decisions reflecting their motivation. Expectancy theory suggests motivation is explained through three components: expectancy, instrumentality, and valence.

Motivation = f(Expectancy, Instrumentality, Valence)

Expectancy measures an individual's perception of how likely it is (probability between 0 and 1) that expended effort will lead to a certain level of performance. For example, expectancy can measure students' perceptions of how likely the effort spent studying for an exam will lead to good exam results. If the student perceives no relationship between effort and performance, expectancy is 0. If the student perceives a strong relationship between effort and performance, expectancy is at or close to 1.

Expectancy = [Effort → Performance link]

Instrumentality measures an individual's perception on how likely it is (probability between 0 and 1) that the expectancy-performance outcome will lead to a subsequent, desired outcome. For example, instrumentality can measure students' perceptions of how likely the good exam results will lead to a better grade in the class. If the student perceives no relationship between good exam results and the grade in the class, instrumentality is 0. If the student perceives a strong relationship between good exam results and a better grade in the class, instrumentality is at or close to 1.

Instrumentality = [Performance → Outcome link]

Valence has a value between -1 and +1 and it measures an individual's preference for the desired outcome, the reward. Using the same example, a high positive valence means students place more value on the better grade in the class, a high negative valence means the students place more value on a lower grade in the class, and a zero valence means the student is unbiased with regard to the class grade.

Valence = Attractiveness of Desired Outcome

These early models suggests that these three components, also described as *forces*, interact to determine an individual's overall motivation. If any of these forces is low, or close to zero, overall motivation is also low, or close to zero. To illustrate that point, consider the examples below.

Imagine the students who have no confidence that effort will lead to stronger exam results; perhaps no idea how to effectively prepare for a quiz or an exam. (LOW EXPECTANCY)

Imagine the students who believe greater effort will mean better performance but who do not trust that better performance will lead to a desired outcome such as an improved grade in the class. (LOW INSTRUMENTALITY)

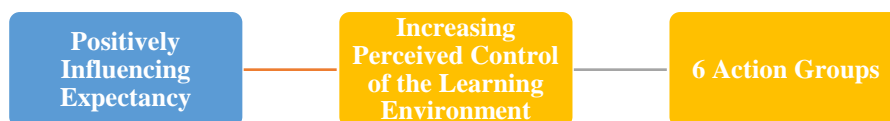
Imagine the students who believe in their own ability to put in effort and produce results and who trust that good results will lead to a subsequent outcome such as a higher grade in the class, but who do not value that subsequent outcome. (LOW VALENCE)

What makes expectancy theory relevant in this context is that it helps us, as professors, recognize the impact of our actions and behavior. It offers us greater awareness, not only of how students perceive expectancy, instrumentality, and valence, but also of how we can influence student perceptions in a positive manner and halt any of our own behaviors that have a deleterious effect.

INFLUENCING EXPECTANCY

Expectancy is the individual's perception of how likely it is that expending effort will lead to a desired outcome. Researchers have hypothesized and, in some cases, have found evidence that higher perceived control and higher self-efficacy will lead to higher expectancy while lower perceived goal difficulty will also lead to higher expectancy (Bandura, 1986; Bandura & Estes, 1977; Bandura, Adams, Beyer & Greenwald, 1977; Gavin, 1973; Lawler, 1970). This supports the idea that professors may be able to positively influence students' expectancy and overall motivation by increasing students' perceived control of their learning environment, by increasing students' confidence and self-efficacy or by decreasing students' perceptions of goal difficulty.

Increasing Students' Perceived Control of the Learning Environment



To increase students' **perceived control of their learning environment**, professors can focus on six "action groups."

Offer a variety and choice of learning tools. Students are more likely to recognize tools consistent with their learning style and employ them or try to adopt new tools if they have a variety from which to choose.

Offer a multitude of self-assessment opportunities. Self-assessment allows students to better understand how effectively they study and how much more study is required. It helps them measure whether or not they are fully prepared.

Gather and respond to feedback. Students need a voice and they need to make sure their voice is being heard. Students also offer some of the best suggestions on what

practices can help them. Professors can show students that they value student input and student ideas by seeking input, responding to all suggestions, implementing as many as possible, and explaining why some suggestions may be helpful but cannot be employed.

Be flexible and allow students some choice on how to earn their grade. Opportunities to work harder for additional points or to choose how to show their knowledge puts students "in the driver's seat."

Offer incentives. Incentives change behavior. Creatively implement opportunities for high achievers, low achievers and everyone in-between. Providing optional opportunities will give students greater control.

Make resources easily accessible. Students are quick to point to a reason they cannot succeed. By giving students a number of ready resources, you undercut their opportunity to make excuses and, for those who actively seek these resources, you give comfort by showing them where to seek these resources.

Appendix Exhibit 1 lists specific actions professors can take for the categories above.

Increasing Students' Confidence and Self-Efficacy



To increase students' **confidence/self-efficacy**, professors can focus on four "action groups."

Offer tips. Students respond well to suggestions and are often particularly attentive and keenly aware you are trying to help them when you make a habit of offering tips.

Remind students how to succeed. Students appreciate regular reminders and giving them meaningful guidance on a regular basis is helpful (e.g., here's what I suggest. . . . you can do really well if you focus on . . .).

Share tips from other students. Students themselves are quick to offer up tricks that work for them and most students are also eager to hear tips from their peers.

Show students you want them to succeed by giving them "secrets to success."

Start on day one and never stop; students pay attention when you give meaningful advice. Market them as "secrets to success" when your ideas are easy to employ, relevant and creative but also ideas that students may have likely otherwise overlooked.

Let students know you believe in them and that effort is the key to success.

Professors who encourage their students by telling them effort is critical, that they believe in the students and believe in their potential for success are going to have more motivated students than professors who never address the issue or those who, perhaps unintentionally demotivate students by telling them how hard the class is and that they should not expect to do well. As one example focusing on effort, students are sometimes frustrated when they are not understanding a topic and other students are doing well. They may attribute this to their own lack of ability. Students likely do not realize how much harder their peers are working to learn the material. Professors can help by providing many opportunities for extra practice, and then measuring the benefits of using these tools. Give students the facts: demonstrate that success is linked to effort and explain that the key is to use the available resources. For example, tell students:

Did you know that 100% of those who achieved an A on Exam 1 were students who completed the self-test?

OR

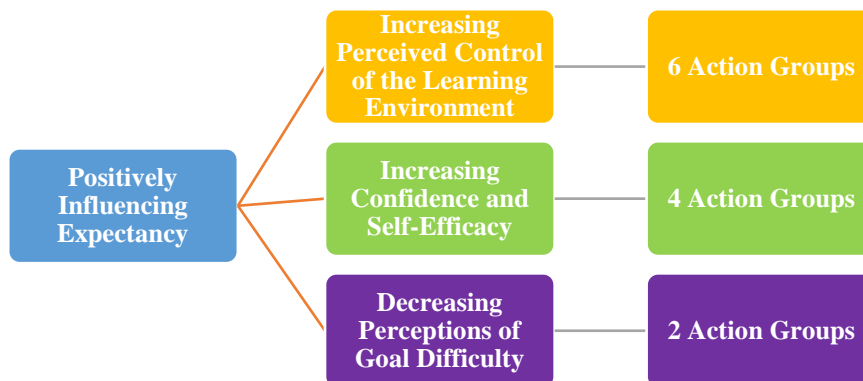
70% of the students who completed the self-test scored above 85% on the exam.

Remind students that you want them to succeed. Consider whether or not your current students know that you want them to succeed. Tell students you are extremely interested in their success and that you will bend over backwards to help them in any way you can. Then do so. Perhaps the greatest asset you can give your students is the fact that you want them to do well. You can simply tell them this. You can remind them to ask you what you can do to help them. You can offer them an inviting atmosphere for questions. You can encourage them to come to your office to study old exams. You can make sure they know you are not too busy for them and that they are a priority. You can invest in them.

Be enthusiastic yet clear on expectations. Be clear about your expectations starting on day one. Explain to students that you hold them accountable for staying current in the class, and then hold students accountable for assignments that will help them achieve success.

Appendix Exhibit 2 lists specific actions professors can take for the categories above.

Decreasing Students' Perceptions of Goal Difficulty



To decrease students' **perceptions of goal difficulty**, professors can focus on two "action groups."

Assess class difficulty and make sure it is appropriate. Ensure the class is structured to cover the material which will be assessed, and that all resources are effectively reviewing the key concepts. Make sure quizzes and exams are a fair reflection of what is covered in class and in other assignments. Be cautious about unnecessary time pressure on exams. Set reasonable expectations.

Emphasize cooperation. Encourage students to work together to share strategies. Use group work in class so students become acquainted with each other. Consider incenting students to help explain concepts to each other, or to the class.

Decreasing student perceptions of goal difficulty goes beyond these two action groups and includes many, if not most, of the suggestions under sections I and II above.

INFLUENCING INSTRUMENTALITY

As noted earlier, instrumentality measures an individual's perception on how likely it is that the expectancy-performance outcome will lead to a subsequent, desired outcome. For example, if the student puts in effort, learns the material and does well on the exam, how likely is it that the student will achieve a better grade in the class. When student perceptions on instrumentality are higher, motivation is higher.



To positively influence instrumentality, professors should **focus on strategic communication**.

Focus on strategic communication. Since instrumentality deals with the link between performance outcomes and rewards, professors should be very clear about how performance translates into grades.

Be clear about grading policies. Explain how students earn scores and be sure to repeat this throughout the course. Having a clear, detailed explanation of grading on the syllabus is essential, but not sufficient to make sure students fully understand it.

Post grades in a timely manner. Students should always know where they sit with their grades. Make sure they also know and understand the opportunities they will have to improve their grades. Explain any appeal process and encourage students to inquire if they have questions on their grades.

Clearly communicate the grade impact of each assignment, quiz or exam. Explain, for each grade component, its impact on the overall grade. Help students see that doing exceptionally well on a given assignment will offer some cushion on future

assignments. Encourage them to recognize the benefit of investing early in their grade.

Be clear and consistent with the format of quizzes, exams and assignments. Help students understand what to expect.

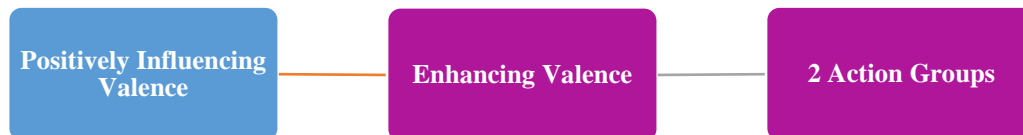
Be objective and fair. Never treat grades as a tool for penalties or reward for kindnesses. Consider avoiding grading policies that put students at risk—where their outcome is based on how others perform. Grading on a curve that limits the number of top grades can be seen as punishment. Students who study and learn the material can get a different grade on one test versus another test even if they receive the same score. Predictability is key.

Appendix Exhibit 3 lists specific actions professors can take for the strategic communication suggestions.

INFLUENCING VALENCE

As explained earlier, valence measures the attractiveness of the final, desired outcome. If the desired outcome is very attractive, valence is close to 1. If the outcome is unattractive, valence could be close to -1. A valence close to zero means the subject (in this case, the student) is indifferent to the outcome and overall motivation will also be close to zero.

Professors need to consider how important the class outcome (e.g., grade, learning) is and how to make it meaningful for the student.



To enhance students' attraction to the desired outcome, valence, professors should focus two "action groups."

Create desired outcomes. Think beyond the logical outcomes of the grade and GPA to other things that students will find meaningful. For example, in a beginning financial accounting class, the professor could start by asking how many of the students want to own their own businesses someday, and telling them that after taking this class, they will know enough about accounting to prepare their own basic financial statements. Seek incentives such as opportunities for special awards or participation in prestigious interschool competitions. Sometimes things that appear to be very small incentives are powerful motivators, and they can be if they are highly attractive to students. Perhaps the value lies not in the "prize" itself but what it symbolizes, which may be nothing more than bragging rights.

Communicate the attractiveness of outcomes. Just as individuals are more likely respond to a request if they understand the reason behind the request, students benefit by hearing and better understanding the attractiveness of class outcomes. Professors have the opportunity to help them make these connections. For example, students who are not

motivated to attend class may be motivated to attend once they hear that the professor has given 12 job letters of recommendation to students this semester and for each one, being able to write in that recommendation that this student always came to class and always did their homework was something important to include in that recommendation.

Appendix Exhibit 4 lists specific actions professors can take for the categories above.

CONCLUSION

Professors work to achieve a student body that is engaged and students who are pushing the limits as to what they can achieve. Without doubt some of the most revered professors are those who are able to translate topics into passions, enhance critical thinking and light the fire of student engagement and motivation. Expectancy theory offers us a deeper understanding, and a path to that goal. It also creates accountability by demonstrating the importance of professor behaviors and actions to enhance student motivation.

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Appendix Exhibit 1

Increase Expectancy by Increasing Students' Perceived Control of the Learning Environment		
Action Group	Specific Examples	
Offer a variety and choice of learning tools.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online practice sets • Self tests • Additional readings • Tutorials • Interactive online practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flashcards • Narrated slides • Chapter outlines/summaries • Tutors
Offer a multitude of self-assessment opportunities.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice quizzes • Conceptual multiple choice practice 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practice test problems • Chapter review problems
Gather and respond to feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Midterm feedback • Class discussions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open forums • Anonymous feedback
Be flexible and allow students some choice on how to earn their grade.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Extra credit writing assignment connected with reading an additional book • Research paper vs. presentation vs. exam for a portion of the class points • Double points on the comprehensive final for students electing that option ahead of time • Opportunity to drop their lowest quiz score • Chance to earn partial points back on a quiz if students work through and correct their mistakes • Opportunity to present homework answers to the class (or do a video walkthrough that can be posted) to make up for missed assignments 	
Offer incentives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grade or point incentives for using additional resources (e.g., tutors, online practice, listening to videos) or for assisting other students in the class • Opportunities relating to grades and opportunities <u>not</u> relating to grades but instead relating to things students value (e.g., high achievers may seek opportunities or privileges such as prestigious inter-school competitions) 	
Make resources easily accessible.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respond quickly to e-mail inquiries. • Encourage students to do their homework in the study areas of your department so they can come to you or to student tutors if they need assistance. • Talk about how impressed you are when students come to your office – their ability to self-advocate. [Do you remember how difficult it was the first time you went to speak with a professor, especially as a first year college student?] • Take an active interest in student questions in class and recognize that for some students it may be very hard to raise their hand. Remind them that they are asking good questions. • Keep a candy jar in your office so students will stop by. 	

Appendix Exhibit 2

Increase Expectancy by Increasing Students' Confidence and Self-Efficacy	
Action Group	Specific Examples
Offer Tips.	<p>Remind students how to succeed.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tell student success stories and link it to their effort. • Explain how using the tools provided leads to demonstrated success. • Measure students' use of the additional resources.
	<p>Share tips from other students.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask strong performers during or outside of class to share test or quiz preparation practices that worked for them. Then share these with the class.
	<p>Show students you want them to succeed by giving them “secrets to success.”</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Outline the crucial steps to succeed and help students understand them. • Be specific with your recommendations (e.g., redo homework after each class without looking at the book or your notes to test your understanding of the concepts and move the learning from your short-term memory to your long-term memory).
Let students know you believe in them and that effort is the key to success.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Remind students that they are capable. • Suggest that while the tasks at first may seem insurmountable, your experience shows that with effort and preparation, students master these concepts. • Avoid demotivating students by telling them how hard the class is, that ten students dropped the class last semester, that no student has ever scored above 60% on a certain exam or that studying around the clock for four days is not likely to help. • Be clear that effort will lead to success.
Remind students that you want them to succeed.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicate this frankly with students. • Walk the walk; demonstrate your genuine interest in helping them. • Avoid being short or getting frustrated with them. • Find resources to leverage your time (e.g. student tutors; text/online resources).
Be Enthusiastic, Yet Clear on Expectations	<p>Be clear about your expectations starting on day one.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish appropriate parameters and let the students know so they can plan accordingly. • If attendance and homework completion are important, explain this and give examples of how it can make a difference regarding grades. • Repeat your expectations regularly so students can ask questions and set appropriate standards for themselves. • Follow up with students who are at risk or not following guidelines.
	<p>Explain that you hold students accountable for staying current in the class.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider incentives to keep them current with the material. • Be careful with incentives ==>If demonstrating staying current is critical and class attendance is not measured, you may be inadvertently encouraging students to skip.
	<p>Hold students accountable for doing the activities that will help them achieve success.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold a 3-point quiz every day at the beginning of class. If you do so in the first 3 minutes, students will likely not be late to class more than once. • Call on students regularly in class. Use a note card deck with their names on them that you shuffle frequently, or use an app such as “Randomly” that does the work for you. • Hold pop quizzes. • Ask students to present their ideas in class. • At the end of class, tell students what to look for in the upcoming assigned readings as well as the questions you will have for them at the beginning of the next class period.

Appendix Exhibit 3

Increase Instrumentality through Strategic Communication	
Action Group	Specific Examples
Focus on Strategic Communication	<p>Be clear about grading policies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Clearly define all grade points and graded assignments at the beginning of the course. Explain how homework, attendance, participation, quizzes and exams and other components translate into grades in the class. Make it a separate handout from the syllabus. Explain how grading curves are applied and be clear about opportunities for extra credit.
	<p>Post grades in a timely manner.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Post grade updates online or distribute grades regularly. Ensure all students have easy access to grades or opportunity for grade inquiries.
	<p>Clearly communicate the grade impact of each assignment, quiz or exam.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Just as it is helpful to take students out of course details to periodically review the "big picture," it is helpful to remind students of the overall grade picture and how each assignment fits into the overall grade. Consider using a pie chart or stacked bar chart to highlight the various assignments and help students understand each grade component.
	<p>Be clear and consistent with the format of quizzes, exams and assignments.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Exams which take entirely different approaches one to the next can be unnecessarily (and unintentionally) challenging. Communicate formats and give students practice on the same kinds of formats you plan to use in the quiz, exam, or other assignment.
	<p>Be objective and be fair</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have a clear rubric for essay questions and other assignments that require subjectivity in grading. Apply the rubric consistently and share the rubric with the class well before the assignment is due. Do what you can to encourage students and provide opportunities for those who start out well below where they want to be. Keep them in the game.

Appendix Exhibit 4

Increase Valence by Creating Desired Outcomes and Communicating Outcome Benefits	
Action Group	Specific Examples
Create desired outcomes.	<p>Direct the focus away from the grade as the sole outcome and toward other outcomes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incent high achievers by giving them opportunities and/or honors • Incent all students by offering incentives which anyone or everyone in the class can achieve. As one example, offer small but meaningful accounting rewards (e.g., erasers, mechanical pencils) to all students who achieve a higher score than the prior exam. Post names of the top achievers. • Talk about the fact that accounting majors on most campuses have “bragging rights.” • Regularly share articles, industry magazines and other literature to help students understand the types of jobs and opportunities accounting offers. Help students understand opportunities for accountants are abundant. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • List 10 jobs of last year’s graduates. • List 10 of the most unusual jobs for accounting students in the last 10 years. • List 10 of the most prestigious jobs for accounting students in the last 10 years. • Talk about how many alumni are in the business world and how they would really enjoy hiring our graduates.
Communicate the attractiveness of all outcomes.	<p>Help students understand the importance of their performance, their grades, and other outcomes.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Appeal to their intrinsic motivators by explaining the sense of self-accomplishment that comes with doing well in an accounting class. • Appeal to their extrinsic motivators <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Show how grades translate into preferred interview opportunities. ○ Explain that grades are one of the key measures by which outsiders determine motivation, academic commitment, and ability to manage multiple activities. • Talk about alumni success stories—both for those who did well and for those who were able to turn things around—thereby giving encouragement to all.