

## Acing College: The Achievers' Experience

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### Abstract

“To succeed in college requires hard work, but to succeed in college with distinction requires hard work and so much more”. Obtaining a college education is one of the greatest desires of the young generation at present. Such is probably desired by most parents also, especially those who belong to the lower level of status in life and those who have not undergone formal tertiary education. Knowing the experiences of college achievers can be a basis to formulate principles that can help others to follow their track. This qualitative - narrative research was conducted to describe the personal attributes, classroom experiences, and personal strategies of the achievers. Eighty-one (81) Latin awardees answered the Open-ended questionnaire. The college achievers had a strong self-belief. Among their strengths are good values, inter-and intrapersonal skills and faith in God. To them school is a second home that develops them wholistically. Positive values and time management helped them to cope with school work, and family and God are their main motivators. They had very good interactions with teachers and engagement in school activities. Their classroom climate was good and they had a lot of school work but were of good quality and were coped through prioritization, time management and support of family, teachers and friends. To them, college life was fulfilling and challenging. They differed in their study habits but agreed that reading and reviewing before scheduled examinations is important. Supportive family and friends and classroom experiences and faith and trust in God can help a student ace his/her college education.

*Keywords:* acing college, classroom interactions, college achievers, personal attributes, school engagement

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## Introduction

“To succeed in college requires hard work, but to succeed in college with distinction requires hard work and so much more”. Obtaining a college education is one of the greatest desires of the young generation at present. Such is probably desired by most parents also, especially those who belong to the lower level of status in life and those who have not undergone formal tertiary education.

Education can improve the quality of life and lead to broad social benefits to individuals and society (M.Deivam, n.d.). Some considers it as an instrument to alleviate them from their present status to a higher one that can lead to better and improved living, not only for themselves but for the entire family.

Academic achievement represents performance outcomes that indicate the extent to which a person has accomplished specific goals that were the focus of activities in instructional environments, specifically in school, college or university. Furthermore, the relevance for an individual, academic achievement is of utmost importance for the wealth of a nation and its prosperity. There is a strong association between a society's level of academic achievement and positive socioeconomic development (Steinmayr, Meibner, Weidinger and Wirthwein, 2015).

Thousands of students enrol in colleges and universities every beginning of the school year, but only a few would usually end up having latin awards. It cannot be denied also that schools and other agencies would generally prioritize the hiring of new teachers and employees who have graduation honors. It is important that the personal qualities and classroom experiences of these honor graduates be described for such can be used as a guide by other students who would like to receive the same recognition.

This qualitative research that employed the appreciative inquiry approach was conducted to attain the following objectives: personal attributes, classroom experiences, and personal strategies

- 1) Describe the personal attributes in terms of belief in self, strengths, concept of and coping in school and learning habits of the achievers; and,
- 2) Describe the classroom experiences and personal strategies of the achievers

This study finds its foundation on the Self Determination Theory of Deci and Ryan which states that people have innate psychological needs: competence, relatedness and autonomy. If these universal needs are met, the theory argues that people will function and grow optimally. To actualize their inherent potential, the social environment needs to nurture these needs. This theory was utilized considering that the main objective of the study was to describe the college achievers in terms of how they are developed and supported by their parents and all the people in school such as the teachers, peers, the college and the administration. Furthermore, the achievers have the potential to pre-determine their potential as future teachers and leaders of the community.

## **Methodology**

The qualitative research method was used in this study. A qualitative research is an “umbrella term covering an array of interpretative techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world (Van Maanen (1979) in Meriam, 2009). Specifically, the narrative design was utilized to attain the goals of the research. The narrative model occurs over extended periods of time and compiles information as it happens. Like a story narrative, it takes subjects at a starting point and reviews situations as obstacles or opportunities occur, although the final narrative does not always remain in chronological order.

A total of 81 Latin Awardees (Magna Cumlaude and Cumlaude) graduates, referred to here as the college achievers of the College of Education of the Main Campus of Capiz State University participated in the research process. These awardees were graduates of the School Year 2016 – 2017.

An open ended researcher-made questionnaire was used in the gathering of the needed data. Questions were focused on their personal attributes which included their belief in themselves, strengths, concept of school, coping mechanisms for school work, motivators and learning habits. Classroom experiences were focused on interaction with teachers, school climate, engagement in school activities, quantity and quality of school work general college life experiences.

The needed data were gathered applying the following procedures: (1) The list of Latin awardees was secured from the Registrar's Office; (2) With the available list, the researcher personally messaged and approached the awardees if they are willing to participate in the research. Some of them personally returned the questionnaire to the researcher. The others returned them through a personal message in the Messenger and in the email; (3) Data from the gathered questionnaire were then tallied based on the questions; (4) The tallied data per question were then grouped according to themes or commonality; (4) The most common themes were then reported as the major results of the study; and, (5) Validation of the results of the study by the participants was done through personal messages and emails.

## **Results and Discussion**

### **Personal Attributes of the College Achievers**

The attributes of the college achievers are described though their belief in themselves, what they consider as their strengths, their concept of school, the mechanisms they apply to cope with the demands of school, their motivators and study or learning habits.

The college achievers generally have a strong belief in themselves and in what they can do. Faith in God, self-reliance, positive thinking and the support of family increases

this self-belief. Their strong belief that there is someone greater who can make all things possible strengthens their faith in themselves that they will achieve whatever it is that they aspire to achieve. Despite self-doubt due to personal circumstances, there is their idea that through hard work and determination, success will still be attained in the end. The constant and felt support of the family grants them the confidence to always do their best to accomplish the goals they have set.

The strengths of the college achievers are focused on good values, inter- and intrapersonal skills and faith in God. The values of being hard-working, persevering, humble, determined, and responsible stand out as the strengths of the college achievers. Their strong faith in their abilities, being cooperative and being able to work well with others also helped them to cope with life and the challenges that it brings. A strong belief in God also makes them strong as persons, as college achievers.

To the college achievers, school is a home for wholistic development, not only mentally, but also physically, socially and spiritually. It increases their knowledge and skills, helps them build new relationships, and provides them a venue where they can show and further develop their talents. It is also a place where their personalities and values are honed and clarified.

Time management and prioritization are the most common ways that the college achievers practice to cope with school work. The ability to make time for self, school and family is vital in their accomplishment of their duties and responsibilities as a student. Organizing these duties and responsibilities according to importance and necessity made them more capable to complying with all school requirements.

The family is the greatest motivator why the college achievers do very well in school. The hardships of the parents and the economic status of the family drive them to do their best in school and in life. The self-drive to succeed also makes sustains the college achievers to do and give their best in all their undertakings.

The college achievers often study late at night before sleeping, or very early in the morning when it is quiet, peaceful and calming and where they can concentrate and focus. Reading and reviewing notes is commonly practiced by them also, especially when there are scheduled examinations. Although some prefer to be alone and undisturbed, some also studies best when having group studies and exchange of ideas with friends and classmates.

These results support the findings of Odukoya, J. et al. (2018) that summa Cum laudes were found to have higher levels of spirituality, as defined by Bible reading and claiming that they participated in spiritual activities. They control their study activities, avoid unnecessary cramming and ensure that they contained distractions such as social chatting. They prepare for their study and try to reason critically. They have higher levels of self – discipline.

Classroom Experiences of College Achievers

The classroom experiences of the college achievers are described through their interactions with their teachers, the classroom climate that they usually experience when they were still in school, their engagement in school activities, the quantity and quality of the school work, and their general educational experiences.

The college achievers' Interactions with their teachers were very good because the teachers were friendly and accommodating. They interacted with their teachers because they feel that the teachers are welcoming and ready to answer their questions and queries. The warmth and friendly attitude that the teachers show them encourages them to freely express themselves and strengthen the bond of teacher-student relationship. Some of the college achievers felt that they were not able to show their full potential because they were shy and lack self-confidence. These achievers realized that they have missed the chance of becoming better versions of themselves because of this lack of confidence. It is important to note also that a few of them observed favouritism from some teachers that discouraged them to fully interact with their teachers.

Classroom climate may be described as the over-all environment and events that students experience in the classroom. According to Ambrose and colleagues (2010), it may include the intellectual, social, emotional and physical environment of our students in the classroom. The college achievers described their classroom climate as good because of the interactive exchanges of ideas between them and their teachers and classmates. They also expressed that noisy and hot classrooms affected the quality of the interactions between and among the persons in class.

Fredericks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) identify three dimensions of engagement: (1) behavioural engagement: students' participation in education, including the academic, social and extracurricular activities of the school; (2) emotional engagement: students' emotional reactions in the classroom and in the school (a sense of belonging or connectedness to the school); and, (3) cognitive engagement: students' investment in their learning (motivation and self-regulation). They also identified some of the factors that influence student engagement and these are: (1) Teacher factors: teacher interaction style (enjoyment and shared focus, support, responsiveness, directiveness, verbal praise), behavioural and academic expectations held; (2) School factors: includes physical setting factors (physical layout and arrangement of classroom, sensory factors/noise levels, lighting etc), and consistent and structured approaches to the provision of student support and disciplinary measures; (3) Student factors: a student's physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural state, including health issues and disability, peer relationships; (4) Family and community factors: a student's residential circumstances, family support for/involvement in education, and relationships with their family; and, (5) Curriculum and resources factors: availability and type of learning resources including technology, dimensions of the learning tasks (level of difficulty, interest, meaningfulness to learner), task design, learning goals and objectives, and assessment approaches. The college achievers' engagement in school activities was very good considering the friendly and accommodating personalities of the teachers and the positive classroom climate. It is important to note however that

their degree of engagement was still dependent on their personal choice whether they will participate or not. This means that their emotional status and self-evaluation could either help them to engage maximally or prevent them from doing so.

The college achievers were exposed to a lot of requirements, projects and other school work, but to them, these were necessary for them to grow and develop as future teachers. Furthermore, they said that they were able to accomplish all these because they know how to prioritize their work, they managed time efficiently and they have emotional and moral support from their family, teachers and friends.

Generally, the achievers considered their college education as fulfilling and challenging with varied experiences which are like jewels and stones. The hardships and challenges that they were able to overcome helped them to become better persons, better teachers. The stones are the hardships and challenges and the jewels are the successes they have attained, especially the academic award that they received in their graduation day. They considered their college education as the transformation process that awakened their full potential.

The findings of the study of Macneil, Prater and Busch (2009) states that that students achieve higher scores on standardized tests in schools with healthy learning environments. This finding is supported by the results of the present study.

Furthermore, support from teachers and peers can have a profound influence on students' success (Wang & Eccles, 2013), well-being (Van Ryzin, Gravely, & Roseth, 2009), and overall adjustment in school (Deci et al., 1991; Wentzel et al., 2010). Interactions with teachers and peers play a central role in supporting young adolescents' academic motivation, classroom engagement, and sense of school belonging (Wentzel, 2012; Wentzel & Wigfield, 2007) as stated by Kiefer, Alley, and Ellerbrock (2015),

### **Personal Strategies of the College Achievers**

The college achievers have different descriptions of their personal principles and strategies on how they became latin awardees. However, the following came out as the final themes that unified these principles and strategies.

The first was belief in self. They belief that if a student believes in him/herself and in what he/can do, then he/she can become a college achiever. Faith and trust in self guided and reminded them to always do their best, to go the extra mile, to go beyond and to excel in school.

Reliance to God was very important in the college achievers' success and accomplishment. The constant call to God, and reliance on His help and mercy assured them that they can reach their goals and be at the top of their classes.

Setting personal goals and working on the realization and attainment of that goal set the achievers apart from their classmates for such led them to the right path of

academic success.

The ability to bow down, acknowledge one's weaknesses and limitations reminded the college achievers that by doing so, they would be blessed with supportive family, teachers and friends that will motivate them to go on and finish their degrees with an academic award.

The values of perseverance and hard work constantly reminded them to suffer the pain in order to collect the gain. They expressed that they needed the will to go on despite the challenges and to exert all their efforts to be an achiever.

The presence of family members and teachers who share with them the value of education also motivated and inspired them to be the best of themselves through the award that they received upon graduation.

These results support the findings of Age and Oddrun (2015) that motivational and affective school engagement was predicted primarily by the students' perception of a mastery goal structure.

### **Conclusions**

College achievers' have a strong faith in their capabilities, and in what they can do. Their good values, academic and social skills and faith in good strengthens and motivates them to achieve their goals. The school has been a venue for the honing of their talents and skills and has developed them as total persons and capable teachers of the next generation. Time management and prioritization is an effective way of coping with the demands of school. The family is the most important motivation that can encourage a student to excel in school. Having a regular study habit and spending time for reading and review of lessons is very significant if one aims to succeed in school.

The teacher has an important role in the quality of classroom interactions and climate in the development of college achievers. A supportive and conducive classroom motivate students to excel and become better versions of themselves. School work and other academic responsibilities does not only allow the college achievers to pass the course and excel but also develops values and skills that they can use as future teachers and professionals. College life is challenging and has developed the achievers wholistically. The hardships and challenges they have overcome made them better persons and teachers.

### **Recommendations**

Parents may provide home support that can greatly help their children.

Teachers may modify their teaching styles to fit the learners' learning style. They may be encouraged to provide classroom climates that are supportive for maxim engagement of students.

Classroom experiences may still be improved, especially with the support of the college and the administration, particularly on the provision of conducive classrooms and instructional equipment.

Policies may be formulated by the College and the administration to address the concerns of the college achievers on classroom improvement and development.

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