

UCSD Goals in Action Program Reports Promising Results in Helping Academically At-risk Undergraduates

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What can colleges and universities do to help their low-performing students set and attain higher academic goals while transitioning successfully to campus life?

Social scientists know that poor academic performance not only manifests itself in low grade point averages (GPAs) for these students, but can also be a sign of poor time management and goal-setting skills, low self-confidence, lack of connectedness to campus resources and social support systems, and a feeling of hopelessness in adjusting to the college environment.

Recent findings from an ongoing study at the University of California, San Diego (UCSD) - initiated by Student Health Service, and Student Educational Advancement under Student Affairs -- strongly suggest that low-performing students achieve more when underlying causes relating to poor performance, including social isolation, stress, unrealistic expectations, and shame associated with being on probation are dealt with. A team of UCSD researchers have developed a program that has been empirically shown to increase underperforming students' academic performance and psychological well-being.

The program, known as Goals in Action (GIA) addresses social, behavioral, and psychological functioning both inside and outside the classroom while closely examining the role these factors play in student underachievement, and ways to alleviate such problems, says Daniel Singley, Ph.D. a psychologist in UCSD's Psychological & Counseling Services and principle investigator of the GIA initiative. The program protocol consists of a series of five weekly 75-minute workshops that has shown considerable promise in helping undergraduate students facing academic dismissal to stay in school and to feel better along the way.

According to Singley, "Students who take part in the program not only have the chance to learn concrete skills, and to talk with other people who are in the same situation, but they also learn how to build relationships and to capitalize on the strengths that make them unique as individuals." GIA has been conducted and studied at UCSD over three quarters (spring 2006, winter 2007 and spring 2007) during which 200 undergraduates have participated in program activities. Findings from studies conducted over the three quarters have shown consistent and encouraging results.

This graph from the winter 2007 quarter GIA program shows that students in the intervention group (meaning those who participated in the workshops) increased their mean quarterly GPA by one full point- and had significantly higher quarterly GPAs than the contrast group that did not take part in GIA workshops.

After taking part in the workshops, undergraduate students subject to academic dismissal (those with a GPA of 2.0 or lower) tend to show significantly higher academic performance (including a full GPA point increase, more quarterly units completed, and better overall academic standing). In addition, these students experienced enhanced psychological well-being (social support, self-efficacy, goal progress, hope, and life satisfaction) than comparable low-performing UCSD undergraduate students in groups who were not invited to participate in the workshops.

"These results suggest that the program is useful in terms of helping academically-at-risk students feel, adjust and perform better in the college environment," Singley indicates. "We're also taking academic improvement programs on campus to the next level because our data are giving us a clearer understanding of *how* students' psychosocial experience of confidence, their goals, social support, stress, and hope relate their academic performance."

"GIA workshops are facilitated by trained Psychological and Counseling Services personnel," says Singley, "and topics covered include time and stress management, goal-setting, garnering social support for academic pursuits, and ways to facilitate hope." A key thread woven among the various aspects of the program is the importance of developing appropriate social support and realistic goals. In addition to attending the weekly workshops, students in the program are given between-session "homework" assignments intended to enhance their goal-setting, planning, self-confidence and social networking skills. During homework assignments participants are encouraged to:

- maintain a day planner
- seek support from their assigned GIA "study buddies"
- talk with professors and teaching assistants
- observe and approach other students in their classes
- form study groups
- explore and use campus resources

A 2006 joint meeting between staffers in UCSD Student Health Service, and Student Educational Advancement under Student Affairs (SEA) established the groundwork for the program. This meeting and subsequent efforts leading to the formation of GIA were headed by Loren Thompson, Ph.D., Assistant Vice Chancellor of Student Educational Advancement, and Brian J Murray, M.D., Assistant Vice Chancellor of Student Health & Wellness, with academic support entities such as the Office of Academic Support & Instructional Services (OASIS) under SEA also providing input.

Says Murray: "Students on academic probation are often lost in the system and not able to extract themselves from a downward spiral. A new, innovative approach using positive psychology and self-esteem enhancement was proposed with the concept of promoting general wellness and allowing students to thrive in a supportive milieu."

Singley and colleague Jeanne Manese, Ph.D., of Psychological & Counseling Services, first conducted GIA as a pilot project during the Spring 2006 quarter at UCSD's Eleanor Roosevelt College. The project included 27 low-performing undergraduates in the intervention group, and a contrast group of 29 low-performing students - all of different genders, ethnicities and graduating class levels. The results showed promising results in terms of psychosocial and academic gains made by students in the intervention group, so they made plans to expand the scope of the study.

During the Winter 2007 quarter, Singley and Manese teamed up with Dr. Murray to expand the project to include a group of students from UCSD's Warren, Eleanor Roosevelt and Thurgood Marshall Colleges who were facing dismissal for academic reasons. A total of 149 students (the intervention group) took part in the GIA workshops during this phase of the study. Academic data for the contrast group of students from subject to dismissal from the other three colleges at UCSD was assessed, and the findings largely mirrored those from the pilot study: The intervention group made significant gains in their psychosocial functioning (e.g. more satisfied, more social support, more goal progress), and also showed significantly higher post-test academic performance (quarterly GPA) than the contrast group. To clarify the program's effectiveness, the researchers decided to implement a randomized control design in which participants were randomly assigned to either the intervention or placebo control conditions.

The GIA randomized control trial was conducted in Spring 2007 at Warren College to compare three groups: an intervention group of 30 students, a control group of 40 students and a contrast group of 153 Warren students who were not invited to take part in GIA, but who were subject to dismissal (SDIS) at the beginning of that quarter.

Once again, the results were in line with the previous two program analyses: The intervention group showed considerably higher post-test academic performance (quarterly GPA, units completed, overall academic standing) and psychological well-being (social support, goal progress, life satisfaction, hope) compared with the control and contrast groups. The students in all three groups were subject to dismissal at pre-test, the GIA intervention group had the highest percentage of students in good academic standing (49%) at post-test, and the lowest percentage of students subject to dismissal (48%) of any of the groups:

"We're thrilled that students in the program seem to be seeing positive results- it's particularly key that we've been able to combine psychological theory and "real-world" research to show that the program works. This program bridges a major gap between the world of research and practical application." Furthermore, by involving staff from diverse units, departments, and colleges on campus, GIA is a truly community-oriented endeavor. Plans are underway to continue the program during the 2007-2008 academic year- starting in the Fall 2007 quarter- while GIA coordinators seek additional operating funds to keep it going.

Although findings are promising, Singley indicates that further study is needed to further assess the program's effectiveness. According to Singley, future research regarding GIA might include: tracking GIA participants' long-term academic performance and scores on the psychological variables included in the study; developing a comprehensive model of how the psychological and academic variables relate to each other, implementing an online component of the program, and looking at how diversity impacts program outcomes (for example racial/ gender characteristics of facilitators and participants).

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Change in Quarterly GPA

