EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

Students’ Perspective into the Apathy and Social Disconnectedness They Feel in Undergraduate Business Classrooms

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ABSTRACT

Apathy and social disconnectedness among undergraduate business students remain poorly understood and under-researched—despite evidence that they produce an adverse impact on learning-related outcomes. Qualitative research was initially conducted among a sample of undergraduate business students to identify the antecedents and learning-related consequences of apathy and social disconnectedness, develop grounded definitions, hypotheses, and scales. This was followed by a survey that aimed to test a conceptual model that emerged from qualitative data. The study finds evidence to suggest that high levels of anxiety among students antecedes social disconnectedness and powerlessness, which trigger apathy or the lack of caring about being a student or attending college. These psychosocial problems are severe enough, the study finds, to adversely impact the quality of students’ learning experiences. Implications for new thinking and research are discussed, and implications for improving instruction are derived from the findings.

Subject Areas: Learning Outcomes, Student Anxiety, Student Apathy, Student Powerlessness, Student Social Disconnectedness.

INTRODUCTION

Escalating fragmentation of the American social fabric (Putnam, 2000), and growing apathy in the society has concerned scholars for over a decade (Besharov & Gardiner, 1998; Eliasoph, 1998). Recent reports show that student apathy effectively frustrates attempts to reform secondary education (Friedman, 2010). Colleges are not immune to these societal problems; disturbing presence of apathy and social disconnectedness is reported among undergraduate business students as well (Bjornsen, Scepansky, & Suzuki, 2007; Jassawalla, Sashittal, & Malshe, 2009). Instructors are often familiar with these problems. Regardless of the selectivity employed in admissions, most have seen evidence of: (a) student apathy; i.e., the
general lack of motivation and disinterest in learning and performance outcomes, and (b) students’ social disconnectedness (henceforth disconnectedness); i.e., the social distance, disengagement, and alienation that can inhibit collaboration and learning with others in a classroom environment. While these are not universal psychosocial afflictions, the Jassawalla et al. (2009) study suggests that even a few apathetic, disconnected undergraduate business students can produce a strongly disconcerting and disruptive social environment and inhibit learning in classrooms.

The concern with students’ psychosocial health is not new. The literature is rich with discussions of student loneliness (Asendorpf, 2000), shyness (Mounts et al., 2006), isolation (Berman & Sperling, 1991), depression (Wolf, Scurria, & Webster, 1998), social self-efficacy and social skills (DiTommaso et al., 2003), and apathy toward national politics (Leob, 1994; Pinkleton & Weintraub-Austin, 2004; Speckman, 2004). Very little is known, however, about how undergraduate business students make sense of apathy and disconnectedness; what they identify as the principal reasons for their emergence, and how they define their effects on the quality of their learning experiences.

The principal purpose of this article is to discuss key findings of a two-stage study that sheds light on apathy and disconnectedness from the perspective of undergraduate business students. In the first stage, 68 students enrolled in an undergraduate business program were asked to describe their experiences with apathy and disconnectedness, identify their key antecedents, and define a high-quality learning experience. Grounded in their voices, definitions, a conceptual framework, scales and testable hypotheses were developed. Similarly, the definition of quality of student learning experiences (QSLE) construct—a self-assessed, subjective, and affective learning outcome—was derived from student voices as the dependent variable of the study (Brown, 2005). In the second stage, 537 students enrolled in a business program were surveyed to test the conceptual model that emerged from qualitative data. The study focused on student perceptions and their subjective attributions of antecedents and learning-related consequences, i.e., it differs from attempts to identify neurobiological triggers of apathy and social disconnectedness, and from attempts to assess causal linkages using experimental designs. Instead, the purpose of the study is threefold. First, it aims to simultaneously assess linkages between student attributed antecedents of apathy and disconnectedness and the quality of their learning experiences using a structural equation model procedure. In so doing, it aims to explicate the students’ perspective into consequential and under-researched psychosocial problems that are interfering with effective learning. Secondly, it aims to stimulate new thinking and trigger research by showing the linkage between the findings and current thinking in the literature, and raising new questions that deserve additional academic scrutiny. Thirdly, it aims to derive implications that can speak to the practical realities of instructors and administrators of business programs.

CONCEPTUAL BACKGROUND

Apathy

Much is known about apathy and its antecedents and consequences—even though very little is written about the specific experiences of undergraduate business
students. Apathy is defined as “the lack of attention, concentration, and control leading to disruption in consciousness and to the waste of psychic resources and skills,” (Delle Fave, & Massimini, 2005, p. 270). In the Jassawalla et al. (2009) study, students view apathetic students as lazy, disinterested, and inconsiderate toward others. The antecedents of apathy have received some attention; it is known to emerge as a psychological defense against feelings of hopelessness, and emotional and physical deprivation (Okada, 1995). In the higher education context, it is currently attributed to leaving home to live alone in college (Guernina, 1992; Tao et al., 2000; Wintre & Yaffe, 2000), and to the stress associated with transitioning from adolescence to adulthood (Coffield, 1981; Coffield & Buckalew, 1986) and from high-school to college (Pancer et al., 2000).

Curiously, apathy among college students in Japan has attracted considerable attention. Scholars have examined how it emerges during pre-college days (e.g., Shimosaka, 2001), crimps the motivation to enter college (Lee, 2004), and impacts students during college years (Matsubara, 1993). Scholars attribute this heightened interest in Japan to racial and cultural homogeneity, where psychosocial problems seemingly stand out in sharp relief (Bjornsen et al., 2007). If this line of thinking is extended, it is likely that symptoms of apathy are overlooked, masked, or erroneously explained away as a benign affliction in multicultural environments.

The consequences of apathy are more clearly identified. In recent discussions, apathy is viewed as the principal reason for failure of educational reform. Friedman (2010) notes:

“The larger cause of failure (in secondary education reform) is almost unmentionable: shrunken student motivation... “Motivation is weak because more students (of all races and economic classes, let it be added) don’t like school, don’t work hard and don’t do well. In a 2008 survey of public high school teachers, 21 percent judged student absenteeism a serious problem; 29 percent cited ‘student apathy,’ ” (Friedman, 2010).

Apathetic students learn poorly (Larson, 2000), feel psychologically debilitated (Besharov & Gardiner, 1998; Larson, 2000; Lee, Draper, & Lee, 2001), and struggle with despair, emptiness, helplessness, and powerlessness (Campling, 2002). Apathy directly impacts student interactions with others; apathetic students are less extroverted, less trusting (Bjornsen et al., 2007), and more dissatisfied and fatigued than others (Shimosaka, 2001). Because apathetic people fail to learn important skills of give and take, they fail to develop social capital, and fail to participate in collective processes even when they want (Putnam, 2000). They are also less likely to adjust to new environments, less likely to seek self-actualization (Davidson, Bromfield, & Beck, 2007), and less likely to re-enroll after their freshmen year (Davidson & Beck, 2006).

**Social Disconnectedness**

Of the two psychosocial problems of interest to the study, disconnectedness remains the more underdeveloped construct. In the Jassawalla et al. (2009) study, students characterize others as disconnected based on the extent to which they do not like or get along with others, or do not fit in or belong to the cliques in classrooms. Putnam’s (2000) seminal study on the social disengagement in American society remains the most comprehensive work in this area. He demonstrates how social
Students’ Perspective of Apathy and Social Disconnectedness

bonds underlie a satisfied life, and shrinking social capital and Web of close social networks in America are threatening personal health. He notes:

“We tell pollsters that we wish we lived in a more civil, more trustworthy, more collectively caring community. The evidence from our inquiry shows that this longing is not simply nostalgia or “false consciousness.” Americans are right that the bonds of our communities have withered, and we are right to fear that this transformation has very real costs.” (Putnam, 2000, p. 302, emphasis in original).

As a consequence, acutely disconnected people, “often see themselves as outsiders, feel misunderstood by others, have difficulty sharing with the social world, and are uncomfortable in social situations” (Lee et al., 2001, p. 310). They experience high levels of anxiety, loneliness, depression, and other negative emotions (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Lee & Robbins, 1998). Conversely, when students feel connected with others, it is reflected in the awareness of a lasting personal relationship and closeness with others in the social environment (Lee et al., 2001; Lee & Robbins, 1995, 2000).

Disconnectedness is currently attributed to early attachment behaviors in the nursing literature (Hagerty et al., 1993). The popular press attributes disconnectedness to proliferating online resources that get in the way of students congregating with others in libraries (Scott, 2001), and to Web-based social networking tools and video games that get in the way of face-to-face interactions (Crawford, 2005). Despite these notions, causal insights are hard to identify; it remains unclear whether disconnected people gravitate toward the Web, or immersion in the Web causes people to disconnect with others, or both. Some insights into the likely antecedents of disconnectedness can be derived from studies of closely related constructs such as loneliness (see Cacioppo & Patrick (2008) for elaboration on the loneliness construct; see Wei, Russell, & Zakalik (2005) for complex linkages between disconnectedness, loneliness, depression, and underdeveloped social skills among college students; and Russell (1996) for a scale to assess loneliness). For instance, loneliness emerges from students’ failure to learn important social skills (DiTomasso et al., 2003) because early college years can be stressful (Berman & Sperling, 1991), and cause feelings of depression (Wolf et al., 1998). Loneliness also emerges from early attachment anxiety, i.e., fear of rejection, and from attachment avoidance, i.e., fear of dependency and intimacy (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The business education literature, however, largely fails to acknowledge the existence of this psychosocial problem, and has little to say about its causes and consequences in undergraduate business programs.

Quality of Student Learning Experiences (QSLE)

The initial conceptualization of this construct was aligned with current notions of affective learning outcomes (Kraiger, Ford, & Salas, 1993), student satisfaction (Sitzman et al., 2010), student happiness (Voss, Gruber, & Reppal, 2010), and student confidence about translating their learning into actions (Bandura, 1977). To develop a grounded definition, however, students were asked to define QSLE and developed this construct as a dependent variable for the second-stage study.

At present, there are two opposing views regarding effective assessment of student learning outcomes. One view holds a dismal view of student self-reports
and perceptions of affect; they are regarded as invalid and unworthy indicators of student learning (Goodman & Beenen, 2008; Pringle & Mitri, 2007). Even though the Sitzman et al. (2010) meta-analysis finds 43% of studies hold self-assessment as a valid indicator of learning, self-assessment of knowledge is suspect because people overwhelmingly overestimate what they have learned (Kruger & Dunning, 1999). Definition of student learning outcomes, this stream of thinking holds, is a faculty and institutional prerogative. Even the notion of asking students to describe what they want to learn is held in low regard by the adherents of this “faculty prerogative” view. Speaking of college freshmen, Goodman and Beenen (2008) note that students ask for “‘solid,’ quality, competitive education that helps them develop mastery in their field and helps them find a job,” (p. 522). They characterize these students’ notions as merely general expressions of commonly held beliefs and expectations, unrelated to any particular institution, and powerless for guiding their learning. Aligned with this thinking, scholars have defined what students ought to learn (Chen, Donahue, & Klimosky, 2004; Friga, Bettis, & Sullivan, 2003), and written about how institutions should articulate what, how, and when students will learn what they learn (Goodman & Beenen, 2008). The strong concern for what students ought to learn and for objective measures of student learning outcomes helps explain the literature’s underdeveloped interest in students’ subjective perceptions and evaluation of learning experiences.

The other view holds that self-reported student perceptions are strongly indicative of the actual learning that has occurred (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2006; Endres & Hurtubis, 2009), and reflect many desirable outcomes of students’ on-campus experiences. For instance, student perceptions are viewed to: (a) represent a global measure of the multidimensional student experience on campus (Arbaugh, 2005), and (b) reflect the quality of their social interactions with their team members (Shipley, Johnson, & Hashemi, 2009) and instructors (Miles, 2001). They are also viewed as valid indicators of: (a) students’ interactive experiences with curriculums (Arbaugh, 2000; Benbunan-Fich, Hiltz, & Harasim, 2005); (b) their program’s conduciveness to learning (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2006); and (c) their experiences and satisfaction with their institution (Astin, 1993; Hu & Kuh, 2003; Rode et al., 2005; Sanchez, Bauer, & Paronto, 2006).

The QSLE construct was derived from student voices not only because it reflects student learning, but also because it determines the well-being of instructors and program administrators. First, for instance, poor learning experiences shape the way students evaluate instructors when asked to complete the “end of semester” teaching evaluations. Even though scholars are quick to note that this evaluation is not an objective indicator of a faculty member’s value in the classroom, program administrators rely overwhelmingly on this instrument while evaluating instructors. Worse yet, they discount or fail to conduct classroom observations or analysis of students’ written materials (Lang, 2007). In other words, despite arguments in the literature, good teaching evaluations, word of mouth, and high QSLE scores—all highly subjective and affective measure of liking, preference, satisfaction, and instructors’ popularity—exert an enormous impact on instructors’ tenure and promotion decisions (Marsh, 1983; Sitzman et al., 2010).

Second, poor learning experiences can raise the cost of administering business programs—an issue of great concern to program administrators. Poor learning experiences have the potential to trigger decisions to transfer in an environment
when about half of all undergraduates are already transferring to another college (Goldrick-Rab & Pfeffer, 2009; Knapp et al., 2007; McCormick, 2003, for more on transfer decisions). Poor learning experiences can also exacerbate dropout rates—which trigger a host of undesirable outcomes. Presently, a quarter of all enrolled undergraduates do not finish their degrees, and only 35% of full time university students complete their programs in 4 years (Morisano et al., 2010). Reduced retention rates raise disconcerting questions about the quality (Perry, 2003), and rankings of academic programs (Morse & Flanagan, 2009; Tinto, 2007)—problems that business programs can ill afford. Dropout rates also contribute to the disturbing and growing income gap in society (Carey, 2004). Finally, a poor quality learning experience can adversely impact alumni giving (Cary, 2001) an issue of great concern to outreach efforts. Student dissatisfaction with their learning experiences, despite scholarly opinions about their incidental nature, exert a somewhat overwhelming impact on the well being of instructors and business programs.

METHOD

Stage 1. Qualitative Research

Although Jassawalla et al. (2009) identified apathy and disconnectedness as key issues that trigger social loafing in classroom teams and interfere with student learning, the literature is mostly silent when it comes to explicating the apathy and disconnectedness constructs from the perspective of undergraduate business students. The absence of a critical mass of research findings precluded theory derived hypotheses tests, and implicated a qualitative study. Initially, therefore, small group discussions were conducted in three sections of an undergraduate Organizational Behavior class. To prepare students, one of the co-authors began by defining apathy and disconnectedness in classrooms based on the Jassawalla et al. (2009) study. Students were informed that these definitions: (a) reflect the current understanding of these constructs, but do not adequately reflect students’ perspectives, and particularly, their experiences, (b) are meant to stimulate new and original thinking on their part. They were also informed that they would be asked to provide concrete illustrations to substantiate their definitions (i.e., they would be asked to explain why they defined the constructs as they did). Aligned with the interest in identifying antecedents, grounded definitions, and a conceptual framework showing the linkages among key constructs, students were asked to answer the following questions for homework, and prepare for a discussion in the subsequent class:

a. What do the concepts of student apathy and social disconnectedness in the classroom environment mean to you? How would you define them?
b. What do students experiencing strong apathy and disconnectedness do?
c. What do you think leads to or causes students’ apathy and social disconnectedness in your classroom? What specific examples would illustrate your answer?
d. How would you define a high quality learning experience as a student of this business program?

In the subsequent class, students were initially assigned to groups and asked to discuss their answers to the above questions. An appointed scribe in each team was
required to turn in a written record of their team’s discussion. A total of 68 students participated in the small group discussions, somewhat evenly split across three undergraduate sections of *Organizational Behavior* classes (a required course for all undergraduate business students). After the scribes had turned in their reports, one of the co-authors facilitated a class discussion. The discussion began with the presentation by each team’s spokesperson; other students were invited to join in the discussion as well. The co-author asked probing and follow up questions, sought clarifications and explanations when necessary, and asked for concrete illustrations of the issues being raised. The specific instances and inferences were recorded on the white board and later transcribed by the co-authors. The class discussions lasted approximately 60 minutes (of a 75-minute class).

**Qualitative Data Analysis and Findings**

The first stage of the study culminated in written reports of team interactions from scribes and the notes taken from class discussions by one co-author. These written reports were content analyzed in three stages. First, each of the co-authors, working separately, categorized student responses according to each of the questions (i.e., by questions related to apathy, disconnectedness, its antecedents, and notions about quality of learning experiences). Then they independently identified the key themes in student responses to each question, and developed multi-item measurement scales grounded in these data. The independently derived analyses were compared and contrasted over two meetings among the co-authors. Discussions continued until a consensus was reached regarding themes, inferences, and scales. The reconciled list of themes was translated into measurement scales.

Students had the most to say about disconnectedness, i.e., their responses led to an 11-item Likert scale (see Table 1 for resulting scales and alphas). Questions about disconnectedness retrieved dense schematics that included loneliness, social distance, feelings of alienation, and lack of friends as key concepts. Similarly, student responses to questions about apathy yielded a five-item Likert scale. Students defined apathy in classrooms, much as the literature suggests, primarily as the lack of concern and caring for grades, learning, being a student, or their lives as students. The following grounded definitions of apathy and disconnectedness in undergraduate business classroom teams were derived:

- **Apathy** of undergraduate business students is the extent of disinterest in learning, in their involvement in the class, and in their learning outcomes.

- **Disconnectedness** of undergraduate business students refers to the extent to which they are disengaged, lonely, and distant from their peers in their classroom’s and campus’ social environment.

**Antecedents**

The first inference drawn by the co-author present during the class discussions related to the relevance of age on the emergence of apathy and disconnectedness. Younger students (under 21) seemed to experience apathy and disconnectedness differently from older traditional age students (22–24 year olds). Older students were more articulate, described how they felt in greater detail, and provided more concrete illustrations in response to probing questions. Age seemed a likely
Table 1: Scales and items (all scales are five-point Likert).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Items</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>ANXIETY1. I find working in team environments really intimidating.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \alpha = .8 )</td>
<td>ANXIETY2. <em>I rarely volunteer for activities in class.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(deleted after CFA 3)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ANXIETY3. It is hard for me to initiate conversations with other students.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ANXIETY4. I am often afraid of saying what is on my mind in the classroom.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>ANXIETY 5. <em>I feel like an outsider in my classes.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(deleted after CFA1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ANXIETY6. <em>I am uncomfortable when it comes to interacting with other people.</em> (deleted after CFA0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerlessness</td>
<td>POWLES1. Even if there is something bothering me in my classes, I do not have any power to change the situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \alpha = .753 )</td>
<td>POWLES2. I find it difficult to concentrate in class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>POWLES3. I am often bored and sleepy in classes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>POWLES4. <em>I find that I am not really interested in the courses I am taking.</em> (deleted after CFA1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>POWLES5. <em>I am often frustrated with what occurs in my classes.</em> (deleted after CFA0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Dis-connectedness</td>
<td>SD1. I am often lonely on campus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \alpha = .946 )</td>
<td>SD2. <em>I do not think people around here understand me.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(deleted after CFA4)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD3. <em>I mostly keep to myself on campus.</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(deleted after CFA4)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD4. I see myself as a loner.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD5. I feel disconnected from the general campus environment.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SD6. <em>I feel distant from other students.</em> (deleted after CFA5)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SD7. Even around other students that I know, I do not feel I really belong.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD8. I do not feel I participate with anyone or a group on this campus.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>SD9. I cannot really relate to other students on this campus.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD10. <em>I do not like hanging out with other students.</em> (deleted after CFA2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>SD11. I always get negative feedback from other people.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathy</td>
<td>APATHY1. <em>I do not really care about the grades I am receiving.</em> (deleted after CFA0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>( \alpha = .81 )</td>
<td>APATHY2. I do not really care about being a student here.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>APATHY3. I do not care much about what happens in College.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Continued.
Table 1: Continued

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Scale</th>
<th>Items</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork-related learning</td>
<td><strong>APATHY4.</strong> Attending College is not high on my priority list. <strong>APATHY5.</strong> I am not sure I value the education I am getting at College. (deleted after CFA0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(α = .842)</td>
<td><strong>TRL1.</strong> I am better able to interact with others in a team environment. (deleted after CFA2)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>TRL 2. I have learned a lot because I worked in teams with other students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TRL 3. I think classroom teams have enhanced my learning as a student.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TRL 4. I have learned to work as a team player.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>TRL 5. I am generally enthusiastic about team projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Achievement</td>
<td><strong>AA 1.</strong> Overall, I am learning a lot at (name of the University). (deleted after CFA2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(α = .794)</td>
<td>AA 2. The content of the courses I have taken have really challenged me.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>AA 3. My coursework has helped me develop a meaningful philosophy of life.</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AA 4. I have a better appreciation of the complexity of the real world.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>AA 5. I am gaining knowledge that I will find useful in the real world.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>AA 6. I am learning the kinds of things that I believe will be useful for a career.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Performance (GPA)</td>
<td>My cumulative GPA is: ______</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>I am:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ 18 years old or less □ 19 years old □ 20 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ 21 years old □ 22 years old □ 23 years old</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ 24 years old □ 25 or older</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Antecedent because older students reported a greater propensity for apathy and disconnectedness.

Content analysis showed that students attribute apathy and disconnectedness to feelings of anxiety and powerlessness. A six-item scale emerged from their descriptions of anxiety, which included a combination of feelings of intimidation about working in teams, failing to volunteer, and experiencing difficulty in initiating conversations with others. Their descriptions of powerlessness related to the frustration they felt about their inability to change what was occurring, their inability to concentrate and the extreme ennui in the classroom. The following grounded constitutive definitions for the antecedents were developed:

**Anxiety** of undergraduate business students refers to the felt intimidation in team environments, and fear of initiating conversation, saying what was on their mind, and volunteering for class activities.

Feelings of **powerlessness** as a student refers to the concern about their inability to change what occurs in the classroom and the futility of trying, that is
manifested in the inability to concentrate, and in the persistent feelings of frustration and ennui within the classroom environment.

Quality of student learning experiences (QSLE)
Student responses highlight the expansive domain of this construct. A high quality learning experience, they note, includes: (a) academic achievement, i.e., high levels of content-based learning derived in the business program, (b) teamwork-related learning, i.e., high levels of learning about working with others in teams, and (c) academic performance, i.e., high level learning related to course content reflected in their GPA. High levels of academic achievement or content-based learning occurs when they: (a) learn a lot in terms of breadth and depth of subject matter, (b) are challenged by the relative difficulty of gaining mastery over important concepts, (c) develop a meaningful philosophy of life, i.e., gain knowledge that allows them to make sense of the complex environment in which they find themselves and develop informed and useful perspectives for functioning effectively, and (d) gain necessary knowledge and skills to pursue a career in the business world. From their descriptions, a five-item scale to measure student perceptions of ideal content-based learning outcomes was developed. In a similar vein, high levels of teamwork-related learning occurs if, as a result of participating in classroom teams, they can: (a) interact better with others in teams, (b) learn a lot as a result of working in the team, (c) learn about functioning better as a team member, and (d) feel higher levels of enthusiasm for working in teams. Their descriptions led to the development of a six-item scale to measure student perceptions of ideal teamwork related learning (see Table 1 for alphas and scales).

Conceptual model and hypotheses
Figure 1 shows the conceptual model derived from the qualitative research. The model relates to the following guiding hypotheses that were simultaneously tested in the second stage of the study (all in the context of the perceptions of full time, traditional age (18–25) undergraduate students enrolled as majors or minors in undergraduate business programs):

**H1a:** Higher level of anxiety is linked to higher levels of apathy.

**H1b:** Higher level of powerlessness is linked to higher levels of apathy.
$H1c$: Older students will report higher levels of apathy.

$H2a$: Higher level of anxiety is linked to higher levels of social disconnectedness.

$H2b$: Higher level of powerlessness is linked to higher levels of social disconnectedness.

$H2c$: Older students will report higher levels of social disconnectedness.

Higher level of apathy is linked to lower levels of:

$H3a$: Academic achievement.

$H3b$: Teamwork-related learning.

$H3c$: Academic performance.

Higher level of social disconnectedness is linked to lower levels of:

$H4a$: Academic achievement.

$H4b$: Teamwork-related learning.

$H4c$: Academic performance.

Stage 2. Hypotheses/Model Testing

Survey

The data-derived scales were translated into a questionnaire and administered to 537 students in 33 undergraduate sections offered in a business school of a regional state university located in Northeastern United States. Instructors were asked to circulate the questionnaire while making the following points: (a) the survey aimed to assess student experiences and perspectives, (b) the survey would take 10 minutes to complete and should be returned at the end of the class, (c) students should complete the entire questionnaire, as incomplete questionnaires would be discarded, and (d) students should not fill a questionnaire if they had already completed one in another class. No extra credit was offered for completing the questionnaire, and no student declined to participate (the response rate was 100%).

Sample

After all the questionnaires were collected, an SPSS data file was created by a work-study student assigned to a co-author. The profile of students participating in the survey was as follows. Nearly all (99%) were traditional age, full time students with the average age of 20.6 ($SD = 1.66$), average cumulative GPA of 3.16 ($SD = 0.74$). They had taken an average of 5.58 classes at the university that required them to function in teams and engage in team-based learning. Of the 56% male and 44% female sample, 36% were seniors, 34% were juniors, 22% were sophomores, and 8% were freshmen. Most (51%) had spent at least 2 years at the college (22% were transfer students). Most students were pursuing a business major (43% management and 31% accounting). The remaining students were pursuing a management minor, and majoring in other degree programs (math/sciences (6%), economics (3.4%), communication (3.1%), political science (3%), and psychology (2.5%)).
Table 2: Model modification process for purifying the measurement model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>SB Chi-sq</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>NNFI</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>IFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>Action (variables dropped)(^a)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CFA0</td>
<td>1664.45</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>.856</td>
<td>.867</td>
<td>.868</td>
<td>.054</td>
<td>Apathy1, Apathy5, Anxiety6, Powless5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFA1</td>
<td>1248.76</td>
<td>512</td>
<td>.881</td>
<td>.891</td>
<td>.892</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>Anxiety5, Powless4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFA2</td>
<td>1096.82</td>
<td>449</td>
<td>.888</td>
<td>.898</td>
<td>.899</td>
<td>.052</td>
<td>AA1, SD10, TRL1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFA3</td>
<td>811.95</td>
<td>361</td>
<td>.912</td>
<td>.921</td>
<td>.922</td>
<td>.048</td>
<td>Anxiety2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFA4</td>
<td>708.77</td>
<td>334</td>
<td>.922</td>
<td>.931</td>
<td>.932</td>
<td>.046</td>
<td>SD2, SD3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFA5</td>
<td>556.71</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>.933</td>
<td>.942</td>
<td>.943</td>
<td>.043</td>
<td>SD6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CFA6</td>
<td>499.49</td>
<td>259</td>
<td>.933</td>
<td>.942</td>
<td>.943</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>Proceeded to modification process for purifying the theoretical model</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^a\)Deleted variables cross loaded on latent variables based on LMs Test.

**Purifying the measurement model**

EQS 6.1 software was used to construct the structural equation model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988). First, the measurement model was purified by conducting six successive confirmatory factor analyses (CFA). To assess whether a structural model exists, and has an acceptable goodness of fit, the base model included latent factors and measured variables for anxiety, powerlessness, apathy, disconnectedness, student perceptions of ideal content-based learning and teamwork-related learning. The goodness of fit for the first CFA model was reasonable (RMSEA = .054, CFI = .867, BNNFI = .856, IFI = .868). The goodness of fit was determined using robust estimation on the sample of 537 respondents because Mardia’s co-efficient was 343.7, Satorra-Bentler scaled chi-square was 1664.4 (650 degrees of freedom, \(p = .000\)), and because non-normality can impact multivariate procedures. Lagrange Multiplier (LM) tests were used to identify the items that cross-loaded on several latent variables, and deleted them from the model. Table 2 shows the details of the six CFA tests conducted and the items of the latent variables eliminated as a result of the LM tests; i.e., see the italicized variables in Table 1 deleted before a theoretical model was fitted on the data. The final purified base model had acceptable fit indices (see CFA6, BNNFI = .933, CFI = .942, RMSEA = .042).

**Refining the theoretical model**

The Wald test identifies the paths in the theoretical base model that should be dropped from the model because of smaller than acceptable \(t\)-statistics (Bentler & Wu, 2002). The LM test shows the multiple parameters that can be added to the model (Bentler & Wu, 2002). Based on these tests, a series of revisions were conducted to the base model. At every step, the model was modified; paths were added and deleted based on the Wald and LM tests. The final model emerged at the third iteration, and has acceptable fit indices (BNNFI = .918, IFI = .926, RMSEA = .043); all path coefficients are significant. Table 3 summarizes the
Table 3: Model modification process for purifying the theoretical model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model</th>
<th>SB Chi-sq</th>
<th>Df</th>
<th>NNFI</th>
<th>CFI</th>
<th>IFI</th>
<th>RMSEA</th>
<th>Action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Step 1 | 618.61 | 313 | .891 | .903 | .904 | .05 | Dropped links:
Disconnectedness → academic Perf.
Age → disconnectedness
Powerlessness → disconnectedness |
|        |          |    |      |      |      |       | Added links:
Disconnectedness → apathy
Anxiety → powerlessness |
| Added link: |     |    |      |      |      |       | Academic achievement → teamwork-related learning |
| Step 2 | 633.34 | 315 | .915 | .923 | .923 | .44 |            |
| Step 3 | 578.26 | 316 | .924 | .931 | .932 | .42 | All remaining links are significant |

Final model reported

Figure 2: Revised theoretical model.

Key Findings

The contrast between Figures 1 and 2, and the list of hypotheses supported and unsupported by the data serve as a basis for this discussion (Table 5 includes changes made at each iteration and the corresponding fit indices. Figure 2 shows the revised theoretical model; Table 4 shows the fit indices.

Key Findings

The contrast between Figures 1 and 2, and the list of hypotheses supported and unsupported by the data serve as a basis for this discussion (Table 5 includes...
Table 4: Fit indices of the theoretical model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parameter</th>
<th>Estimate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Satorra-Bentler zcaled Chi-square</td>
<td>602.6125 (317 degrees of freedom)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bentler-Bonett non-normed fit index (NNFI)</td>
<td>.924</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative fit index (CFI)</td>
<td>.931</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bollen’s fit index (IFI)</td>
<td>.932</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Root mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA)</td>
<td>.042</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>90% confidence interval of RMSEA</td>
<td>.036–.047</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

means, alphas, and correlations; also see Table 6 for measurement and structural parameters from the revised theoretical model). The comparison highlights the key contributions of the study; i.e., the revised theoretical model explicates the nature of apathy and disconnectedness from the students’ perspective, isolates their significant antecedents, and shows their significant consequences. Briefly, the following links are significant as hypothesized:

a. Higher level of powerlessness is associated with higher levels of apathy (H1b is validated).
b. Older students report greater levels of apathy (H1c is validated).
c. Higher levels of anxiety are associated with higher levels of social disconnectedness (H2a is validated).
d. Higher levels of social disconnectedness are associated with lower levels of teamwork-related learning (H4a is validated).
e. Higher levels of apathy are associated with lowered academic achievement and performance (H3b and H3c are validated).

However, contrary to qualitative research-derived hypotheses, the study suggests that:

a. Anxiety and apathy are unrelated (H1a is disproved).
b. Powerlessness and social disconnectedness are unrelated (H2b is disproved).
c. Older students do not report higher levels of social disconnectedness (H2c is disproved).
d. Social disconnectedness does not lower academic achievement nor academic performance (H4b and H4c are disproved).
e. Apathy does not lower teamwork-related learning (H3a is disproved).

Moreover, the study highlights three new relationships not identified by qualitative research:

a. Higher levels of social disconnectedness are associated with higher levels of apathy.
b. Higher levels of anxiety are associated with higher levels of powerlessness.
c. Higher levels of academic achievement are associated with higher levels of teamwork-related learning.
Table 5: Means, standard deviation, alphas, and correlations (final model).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Alpha</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>Anxiety</th>
<th>Powerlessness</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Social disconnectedness</th>
<th>Apathy</th>
<th>Teamwork-Related Learning</th>
<th>Academic Achievement</th>
<th>Academic Performance</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anxiety</td>
<td>.732</td>
<td>2.458</td>
<td>.728</td>
<td>.339**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerlessness</td>
<td>.753</td>
<td>2.833</td>
<td>.806</td>
<td>.373**</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age*</td>
<td>20.56</td>
<td>2.079</td>
<td>.01</td>
<td>.034</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S. Disc.</td>
<td>.916</td>
<td>1.88</td>
<td>.743</td>
<td>.413**</td>
<td>.177**</td>
<td>.017</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathy</td>
<td>.763</td>
<td>1.582</td>
<td>.634</td>
<td>.251**</td>
<td>.250**</td>
<td>.122</td>
<td>.434**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-R Learning</td>
<td>.831</td>
<td>3.355</td>
<td>.821</td>
<td>-.084</td>
<td>-.116**</td>
<td>.04</td>
<td>-.254**</td>
<td>-.203**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acad. Achiev.</td>
<td>.749</td>
<td>3.662</td>
<td>.628</td>
<td>-.084</td>
<td>.295**</td>
<td>-.04</td>
<td>-.161**</td>
<td>-.296**</td>
<td>.344**</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acad. Perform.</td>
<td>3.165</td>
<td>.741</td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td>-.108*</td>
<td>-.081</td>
<td>-.121</td>
<td>-.222**</td>
<td>-.091*</td>
<td>.061</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*No alpha calculated.
### Table 6: Measurement and structural parameters from the Revised Theoretical Model.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Structural Model</th>
<th>Betas (t-values)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Powerlessness → anxiety</td>
<td>.344 (4.484*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social disconnectedness → anxiety</td>
<td>.534 (6.898*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathy → powerlessness</td>
<td>.255 (4.426*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathy → social disconnectedness</td>
<td>.465 (7.275)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apathy → age</td>
<td>.124 (2.943)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork-Related Learning → Social Disconnectedness</td>
<td>-.180 (−3.871*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teamwork-Related Learning → Academic Achievement</td>
<td>.350 (5.202*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Achievement → Apathy</td>
<td>−.387 (−4.917)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Performance (GPA) → Apathy</td>
<td>−.282 (−4.174*)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Measurement Model

| Apathy → I do not really care about being a student here | 1** |
| Apathy → I do not care much about what happens in College | 1.103 (10.791) |
| Apathy → Attending College is not high on my priority list | .768 (8.566) |
| Anxiety → I find working in team environments really intimidating | 1** |
| Anxiety → It is hard for me to initiate conversations with other students. | 1.816 (8.723) |
| Anxiety → I am often afraid of saying what is on my mind in the classroom. | 1.774 (8.568) |
| Acad. Achievement → The content of the courses I have taken really challenged me. | 1** |
| Acad. Achievement → The coursework has helped me develop a meaningful philosophy of life. | 1.9 (6.518) |
| Acad. Achievement → I have a better appreciation of the complexity of the real world. | 2.342 (6.406) |
| Acad. Achievement → I am gaining knowledge that I will find useful in the real world. | 2.29 (6.182) |
| Acad. Achievement → I am learning the kinds of things that I believe will be useful for a career. | 2.188 (6.198) |
| Powerlessness → Even if there is something bothering me in my classes, I do not have any power to change the situation. | 1** |
| Powerlessness → I find it difficult to concentrate in class. | 1.836 (8.327) |
| Powerlessness → I am often bored and sleepy in classes. | 1.732 (7.95) |
| S.Disc → I am often lonely on campus. | 1** |
| S.Disc → I see myself as a loner. | .921 (17.039) |
| S.Disc → I feel disconnected from the general campus environment. | 1.077 (22.249) |
| S.Disc → Even around other students that I know, I do not feel I really belong. | .979 (21.353) |
| S.Disc → I do not really participate with anyone or a group on this campus. | .818 (14.17) |
| S.Disc → I cannot really relate to other students on this campus. | .915 (18.081) |
| S.Disc → I always get negative feedback from other people. | .592 (11.853) |
| T-R Learning → I have learned a lot because I worked in teams with other students. | 1** |
| T-R Learning → I think classroom teams have enhanced my learning as a student. | 1.128 (25.15) |
| T-R Learning → I have learned to work as a team player. | .592 (12.107) |
| T-R Learning → I am generally enthusiastic about team projects. | .807 (14.839) |

*Parameter estimates are standardized with t-values shown in parentheses; all values are significant at $p < .05$.

**Indicant loading fixed at 1 to set the scale (t-values, all significant at $p < .05$).
COMPARING FINDINGS AND CURRENT THEORY

In this discussion, key findings of the study are compared and contrasted with current notions in the literature. The purpose is to place the findings in perspective, highlight the unique contributions, and aid future theory development. The discussion culminates therefore in a list of research questions raised by the findings. Briefly, student attributions emerge as highly perceptive, and reinforce some and contradict other views in the literature. In a similar vein, the findings about anxiety and powerlessness are aligned with some, and challenge other notions prevalent in the literature.

The Perceptiveness and Value of Student Attributions

Among the reasons that students’ subjective perceptions, attributions, and self-reported learning remain under-represented in the business education literature are the concerns that: (a) students may not know enough to articulate their psychosocial problems nor make valid attributions about their causes and consequences, and (b) students’ self reports are likely to overstate their learning. The findings provide some evidence to suggest that student definitions and attributions are remarkably perceptive because they resonate with empirical findings in many ways.

First, for instance, their attribution of anxiety as a key antecedent of apathy and disconnectedness has a basis in research findings. Anxiety seems prevalent in the society and likely lies at the root of many psychosocial problems. For instance, generalized anxiety disorder afflicts about 40 million Americans (Henig, 2009). Up to 20% of healthy children are born with a temperamental predisposition toward anxiety and fear of social situations (Kagan & Snidman, 1999), who later become emotionally subdued, cautious, and wary (Biederman et al., 2001). Anxious people are shy (Cheek & Buss, 1981; Crozier, 2000), fail to initiate friendships (Gecas, 1989), and lonely and disconnected (Brennan et al., 1998; DiTommaso et al., 2003; Mounts et al., 2006; Riggio, Watring, & Throckmorton, 1993; Schmidt & Fox, 1995).

Second, the identification of powerlessness as an antecedent of apathy and disconnectedness is similarly perceptive. Powerlessness has concerned scholars interested in pedagogy (Luechauer & Schulman, 2002). Educational research also shows that powerlessness produces alienation, a notion aligned with student definitions of disconnectedness (Wang, 2010). Research in healthcare organizations shows that people ascribe belongingness to their immediate work area when they feel a sense of control or power over their work (Russell et al., 2010), i.e. the linkage between disconnectedness and powerlessness is established. Similarly, research in nursing homes suggests that powerless people feel lonely and disconnected from others (Duncan, 2007), and become apathetic and non-participative (Meddaugh & Peterson, 1997). Some research finds that alienation, apathy, and powerlessness are inseparable constructs (Kanungo, 1992).

Third, student descriptions of the QSLE construct resonate strongly with current discussions. For instance, the data-derived notion of self-assessed academic achievement (content-based learning) is aligned with the summative, end-of-semester evaluations of faculty, instruction, and curriculum content that students are asked to conduct in most classes (Sitzman et al., 2010). Scholars advocate that
such self-assessments of knowledge should be embedded into and conducted periodically during courses because they can influence the learning process (Dunning, Heath, & Suls, 2004; Sitzman et al., 2010; Sullivan, Hitchcock, & Dunnington, 1999). Students’ concern with teamwork-related learning suggests that it factors into satisfaction with learning, and manifests itself sufficiently in their educational experiences. The notion that learning of teamwork skills is an important part of business education is widely shared (Hoover et al., 2010; Munoz & Huser, 2008). Finally, students’ concern with GPA as a key component of the QSLE construct seems to fit with the “faculty prerogative” view of learning assessment. GPA not only serves as a direct measure of learning, it also reflects students’ cognitive ability and motivation (Bartels, Bommer, & Rubin, 2000) and psychosocial well being (Rode et al., 2005; Waldman & Korbar, 2004). Rode et al. (2005) find that GPA reflected “initiating and maintaining a range of self-regulatory behaviors... (which) encapsulated motivation, ability and other aspects of performance in a measure that was very important to students and reflected the academic performance of respondents in a wide variety of subject areas, as graded by various raters. . . .” (pp. 425–426). In sum, students’ definition of QSLE can be anchored to theoretical developments in the field of assessing student learning outcomes.

Finally, student attributions of directionality of linkages between key constructs are also perceptive. For instance, the revised theoretical model reinforces current notions about linkages between disconnectedness and anxiety (Lee et al., 2001), apathy, and powerlessness (Campling, 2002). Moreover, while the literature identifies linkages among concepts included in the study, the model adds value by providing preliminary evidence of the directionality of the linkages. While loneliness is attributed to attachment anxiety (Brennan et al., 1998), early attachment behaviors (Hagarty et al., 1993), and linked with the need for attachment (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), the study identifies the directionality of these linkages in the context of undergraduate business programs; i.e., disconnectedness emerges from anxiety in social situations. This literature-derived directionality was tested, however, these models either did not converge, or did not produce significant parameter estimates or fit statistics. The best fit of the model was based on the qualitative-data derived notions of directionality. In sum, findings reinforce the view that students are not just active participants in the learning process, but their self-reports, subjective definitions and attributions of causes are aligned with current notions in the literature—and worthy of study in their own right.

Anxiety

Either the tenuousness of campus life or the proclivity toward dysfunctional anxiety—or the interaction among them—is producing significant levels of apathy among powerless and disconnected students. Anxious students feel intimidated by others, fail to volunteer or initiate conversation, or say what is on their mind in the classroom. Scholars suggest that anxiety can make for attentive friends and good students (Henig, 2009), and that anxiety can sharpen focus on exams (Schmidt et al., 2010). The study does not provide parallel evidence; student descriptions of anxiety is limited to their general sense of dread about saying or doing anything that will attract the scrutiny of others, and about their actions likely to produce
negative social consequences. Similarly, current views implicitly regard anxiety as a consequence and not an antecedent of powerlessness, as does this study. Luechauer and Schulman (2002, p. 42) observe, “... [T]oo many faculty view themselves as either experts who transmit information and concepts or formal authorities who set goals and procedures. They act like bosses. ... This orientation creates grade consciousness, dependency, and a real fear of being stupid.” Anxiety, according to their impressionistic learning, is a product of students disempowered by authoritarian instructors and choice-less curriculums. Student responses suggest and the analysis later confirms that the reverse is likely true, i.e., anxious students feel powerless.

As Figure 2 shows, students’ anxiety triggers disconnectedness and powerlessness, indirectly produces apathy, and eventually hurts the QSLEs, i.e., negatively impacts perceptions of content-based and team-related learning, and GPA. While the ultimate responsibility of reducing anxiety likely rests with students, this finding highlights the importance of faculty and administrator-led initiatives to reduce student anxiety as the root cause of key psychosocial and learning-related outcomes. The first order implications of the findings based on students’ definition of anxiety are clear; anxiety among undergraduate business students may be reduced if their faculty and administrators take steps to create a socially safe environment in the classroom and on campus in which students can confront and manage the intimidation they feel, and initiate conversations and gain feedback without negative socio-emotional consequences.

The findings highlight the importance of new research that can help determine whether dysfunctional anxiety among undergraduate business students emerges from the mismatched square pegs of students’ characteristics and the round holes of undergraduate business curriculums and instruction. First, for instance, the mismatch between what is expected of students by instructors in terms of teamwork deserves examination as a possible source of anxiety. Students in the sample had participated in over five classes that required them to work with others in teams; however specific instructions and guidelines for working in teams were provided in only three of the 33 sections of the classes from which data were collected. Whether leaving students to figure out ways of working with and collaborating with others triggers high levels of anxiety deserves investigation. Currently, more instructors assign students to teams than those who provide clear guidelines about functioning effectively as team members (Bryant & Albring, 2006; Clinebell & Stecher, 2003; Holmer, 2001); i.e., scholars have identified a key mismatch between instruction and expectations in undergraduate business programs. While working in teams, the level of anxiety can escalate if students cannot hold each other accountable or fail to collaborate with each other; i.e., outcomes more likely when they receive inadequate teamwork-related coaching and instruction (Hansen, 2006). The nature and extent of anxiety triggered by the lack of teamwork-related instruction remains under-investigated in business education literature.

Second, the mismatches produced by widely varying student aptitudes and the increased accreditation-driven standardization of b-school curriculums and testing deserve fresh examination as a possible source of anxiety. The population of business students remains at an all-time high. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports that of the 3.2 million graduates of American high schools in 2008, 68.6%
were enrolled in college. In a related vein, of the approximately 2200 institutions offering four-year degree programs, over 90% have non-selective admission policies (Maeroff, 2005). One estimate suggests that 22% of all undergraduates are enrolled in business programs (Chace, 2009). The funneling of approximately half a million students every year (or approximately 15% of all high school graduates) with wide variances in aptitudes into standardized business programs—where curriculums adhere closely to guidelines of accreditation bodies and assessment of learning outcomes relies strongly on standardized multiple choice exams (ETS tests, in-class tests)—may produce mismatches that exacerbate the anxiety. Worse yet, if anxious students perceive others as innately belonging in and comfortable with the academic environment of business programs, it may serve to worsen their anxiety—which as the study suggests is triggering powerlessness and disconnectedness. If future research validates this notion, it will call for a renewed emphasis on student selection, if not for the broadening of business curriculums in response to multiple aptitudes, cognitive abilities, motivations, and interests of the upcoming batches of 18-year old high school graduates.

Third, the mismatch between the millennial generation’s expectations and learning styles and the classroom environment deserves investigation as a possible source of anxiety. Although a critical mass of insights from rigorous empirical studies is overshadowed by writings informed by impressionistic data, most current thinking about the millennial generation (i.e., those born after 1982 and comprising the entire sample) speaks discouragingly of their interest and ability to learn in a traditional college classroom with an emphasis on lectures and one-way communication. For instance, this generation: (a) is quick to disengage if their high expectations are not easily and quickly rewarded (Levine, 2005; Twenge, 2006), (b) prefers classes with low levels of workload and professes low levels of interest in courses that accentuate analytical and computational skills (Milliron, 2008), (c) wants good grades without the interest in putting in requisite effort (Seaman, 2005), and (d) has received and come to expect prodigious stroking and positive feedback—and are quick to disengage and disconnect when it is not received (Levine, 2005). They are also known for: (a) their lack of social trust and for the resulting practical world view (Wolburg & Pokrywcynski, 2001); (b) strong bonds with their parents and their inability to delay gratification (Tucker, 2006); and (c) their inextricable link with the digital environment (Wankel, 2009), i.e., they send and receive an average of 2272 text messages per month, devote over 9 hours a month to social networking sites, and have little fluency with nonverbal communication (Bauerlein, 2009). Whether these descriptors hold up to empirical scrutiny, and whether the mismatch between their defining characteristics and current curriculum and instruction offered in undergraduate business programs produces anxiety are questions for future research.

**Powerlessness**

The study suggests that powerlessness emerges from anxiety and triggers apathy, and adversely affects the quality of students’ learning experiences. This finding differs from the literature’s view in at least two important ways. First, people feeling powerless are known to feel ineffectual and unable to control
interpersonal relationships (Paulhus, 1983). In a similar vein, powerlessness was found to produce distancing (Schmidt et al., 2010). There is no evidence in the findings to suggest that feelings of powerlessness are leading to disconnectedness, although they may impact interpersonal relationships in other ways. Second, powerlessness and dissociative behaviors are defined as unrelated constructs (Irwin, 1998). To the extent apathy is a dissociative behavior—it seems to emerge as a consequence of powerlessness. These differences likely relate to the unique nature of the sample (i.e., traditional age undergraduate business students), and the unique concern with powerlessness as it relates to the classroom.

The literature is largely supportive of the notion that the nature of curriculum and instruction is currently heightening feelings of powerlessness among students. For instance, scholars note that students currently feel disempowered because they cannot impact class policies and due dates, find themselves at the end of one-way communication, find material irrelevant to their lives, receive no opportunity to voice their opinions or apply their learning, and their feedback is solicited only at the end of the semester (Luechauer & Schulman, 2002, p. 43). Conversely, students feel empowered when they: (a) learn on their own, are involved in knowledge creation, and encouraged to disagree and provide alternative points of view, and (b) can relate to instructors’ experiences, in an environment they feel is conducive to learning (Thomas & Velthouse, 1990). Luechauer and Shulman (2002) further note: “Feelings of powerlessness can be managed by reducing “standardization, memorization and regurgitation” (p. 45). Curriculums and instruction, they suggest, should be more meaningful, help students feel more competent, permit them to impact the design of the course, and allow them to make choices about what they learn.

The study, aligned with Luechauer and Schulman (2002) and Thomas and Velthouse (1990), confirms that powerlessness (or disempowerment) is a negative affliction. Additionally, the study finds that: (a) powerlessness-triggered apathy hurts the quality of students’ learning experiences in significant ways, and (b) curricular and instructional innovations can reduce powerlessness if they can initially reduce anxiety. To the extent curricular and instructional innovations cannot address the multiple, complex sources of anxiety, new research on contingency factors is sorely needed to address the question: Who should be empowered, how, when, and by whom? Sole reliance on empowering curriculum and instruction may force students to make decisions about content, schedules, testing, and evaluation that they are unable to make—worsening their anxiety, or produce evidence of learning unacceptable to faculty, administrators, potential employers, and accreditation bodies.

**Questions for Future Research**

For future attempts that aim to assess student anxiety, social disconnectedness, powerlessness, apathy, and the QSLE construct, we present refined measurement scales in the Appendix, Exhibit 1. The following list encapsulates the questions raised by our study that appear to deserve additional academic scrutiny:

a. What faculty and administrator-led initiatives (both campus- and class-related actions) can trigger anxiety among students?
b. Is the mismatch between students’ aptitudes, preparedness, and attitudes, and the demands of the college curriculum triggering anxiety? If so, in what way?
c. Is the lack of teamwork-related instruction, coupled with the requirement to function in teams, triggering anxiety among students?
d. Is insufficiently rigorous selection of students based on objective criteria such as GPA and SAT scores triggering anxiety among students?
e. Is student anxiety related to the expectations and characteristics of the millennial generation?
f. While student empowerment is strongly advocated in the literature, which students should be empowered to make choices about curriculum and instructions, when, and by whom?
g. Why are older students reporting higher levels of apathy? What are the implications for socialization processes led by campus administrators?
h. What are normal levels of anxiety, social disconnectedness, powerlessness, and apathy on a college campus?

IMPLICATIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS AND PROGRAM ADMINISTRATORS

This discussion of implications should be viewed in the context of the following features of students at the university at which this research was conducted; they indicate the nature of the population to which the findings are more generalizable. The average incoming SAT of all freshmen is 1329, average ACT is 29.2, high school average is 93.5, and 79% of the students make up the top 20% of their high school class. Sophomores apply to the business program and are admitted only if their GPA is 2.85 or better (transfer students need GPA of 3.0 or better).

Implications for Innovative Educational Practice

The study produces evidence to support the following notions: (a) undergraduate business students are likely afflicted with significant levels of dysfunctional anxiety, powerlessness, and disconnectedness which trigger apathy and lack of interest in learning and participating in class, and (b) these afflictions are adversely affecting students’ learning experiences. As such, these are disquieting findings given the escalating cost of attending college and the resources directed to promoting psychosocial health of students, i.e., resources directed to all extra-curricular activities. In light of the gravity and prevalence of the problems, three potential areas for innovative educational practice can be identified from the findings.

First, to the extent college policies or instructor actions are exacerbating existing psychosocial problems, or worse yet, creating anxiety and powerlessness where none existed, re-evaluation of curriculums and instruction is strongly advised. For instance requiring students to work in teams without providing coaching and instruction about working in teams likely exacerbates anxiety—and triggers a host of other psychosocial dysfunctions. Courses that require teamwork from students should, the study suggests, provide coaching and instruction for
functioning effectively in teams without assuming that all students are equally pre-skilled. New instruction is strongly implicated because the socialization of the millennial generation has likely rendered them less skilled for formal teamwork without adequate adult supervision (Jassawalla, Malshe, & Sashittal, 2008). When left on their own, and without adequate coaching, they seem less likely to build social relationships with others via face-to-face interaction (preferring cell phones and Web-based social networks), or work well in teams. Similarly, efforts to empower students, as some scholars suggest, are also likely to produce beneficial results (Luechauer & Schulman, 2002). In a related vein, curriculums that show the linkage between classroom-related learning opportunities and career-related success might help students find meaning in what they are learning.

Second, to the extent students are pre-afflicted, and bring dysfunctional levels of anxiety, powerlessness, and social disconnectedness into the classroom, apathy seems likely to result regardless of the curriculum and instruction. Current research suggests that applicants to colleges and business programs are very likely pre-afflicted by high levels of social (Putnam, 2000), and social anxiety disorder (Henig, 2009). Hence, there is merit to thinking about careful evaluation and selection, and preventing some students from infecting the rest of the student body. Careful in-class assessment and monitoring to weed out dysfunctional students is also an implication because of the high cost remedying dysfunctional psychosocial problems that is unfairly borne by all students.

Third, given that apathetic students do not care about being a student or attending college, nor rate college attendance as a priority—it becomes important to ask how and why these students remain enrolled in business programs. In this regard, new thinking about increasing academic rigor in classrooms to increase the consequences of disconnection, disengagement, apathy toward being a student or attending college seems important. It seems similarly important to evaluate whether the variance in the rigor across the curriculum is triggering anxiety among students. For instance, student anxiety may be exacerbated if some classes are too close to therapy; i.e., instructors overtly validate individual student’s feelings, opinions, and world views without judging their merits or providing feedback about their validity whereas other classes are too close to a boot camp; i.e., instructors invalidate individual creativity and contributions, expect unquestioning adherence, and allow no flexibility.

**Implications for Program Administrators**

The findings produce two major implications for undergraduate business program administrators (see Appendix, Exhibit 2 for a list). First, the sample seemed homogenous in terms of age at first glance (i.e., 96% of sample is 23 or younger, and 100% of the sample is 25 or younger; population average estimate is 20.64 ±1.66). However, even within this narrow variation in age, older students reported significantly higher levels of apathy—which produce a significant negative impact on the quality of students’ experiences in the business program. Moreover, based on the qualitative research, it was expected that older students—who had spent more time developing and utilizing socialization skills—would report higher levels of disconnectedness. This, too, was not the case: age and disconnectedness were
unrelated in the findings. This far-reaching impact of age among traditional-age college students has yet to receive any attention from scholars. The findings suggest that administrative effort to socialize and assimilate students should continue beyond freshmen and sophomores; juniors and seniors can benefit from opportunities for interacting and collaborating with others via curricular (e.g. learning communities) and extra-curricular initiatives that alleviate the apathy they feel toward learning.

In a related vein, even though there was no specific hypothesis regarding gender, some findings deserve a brief mention. Female students report significantly lower apathy than male students (male mean = 1.7706, female mean = 1.5055). Female students also report higher levels of content-based learning (male mean content-based learning = 3.67, female mean content-based learning = 3.79), although there is no significant difference in their GPAs. There were no other notable differences among the genders; the structural equation models that emerge from splitting the data by gender are significant, and yield comparable parameters and fit statistics.

Second, the findings highlight the importance of defining normal levels of apathy, disconnectedness, anxiety, and powerlessness among undergraduate business student, i.e., issues relevant to both student selection processes and management of student life. Definition of normal can help evaluate current levels of psychosocial problems and develop remedial action. In the study, the average student apathy (population average estimate with 95% confidence = 1.65 ± .027), and average student disconnectedness (population average estimate with 95% confidence = 1.92 ± .032) are sufficient to produce an adverse impact on students’ learning experiences. These averages are somewhat lower and compare favorably to reports about similar constructs; average shyness is reported as 2.65 and average loneliness as 2.02 on a five-point scale among first semester college freshmen (Mounts et al., 2006). Moreover, population estimates of average students’ anxiety (2.31 ± .029) and powerlessness (2.65 ± .03) suggest that they exist at a higher level than both disconnectedness and apathy. Defining what is normal and what to do if the numbers are abnormal emerge as key challenges related to improving the quality of students’ learning experiences.

CONCLUSIONS

Aligned with the interest in student perceptions, links between constructs defined by students were examined. While hypothesized links were simultaneously tested using structural equation model procedure, the study does not provide evidence of causal linkages because it did not identify the true neurobiological or chemical causes of apathy and disconnectedness, nor conduct an experiment using time series data. Identification of causes is left to future research efforts. While the study provides a cross-sectional snapshot, new studies that can track changes in apathy and disconnectedness, and in their antecedents and consequences, are sorely needed. Similarly, while the study indicates the directionality of linkages based on qualitative-data derived inferences, experimental research is necessary before causal linkages are identified. The validity of the model requires testing across multiple campuses (private and state schools of multiple sizes) and heterogeneous
populations (traditional age and adult students), and in multiple settings (differently ranked business programs) before generalizable, actionable insights are produced.

The key motivator of the present study was the finding that apathy and disconnectedness are: (a) present among students enrolled in undergraduate business programs; (b) associated with the prevalent, if not universal, incidence of social loafing in classroom teams; and (c) negatively associated with student learning (Jassawalla et al., 2009). The grossly underrepresented student perspective also led to the exploration of their subjectively defined experiences, perspectives, and attributions. Apathy and disconnectedness seem alive in business programs, linked to unhealthy levels of anxiety and powerlessness, and hurt the quality of students’ learning experiences. Innovations in educational practices and program administration are necessary to help students realize the full potential of their college education.

References


Students' Perspective of Apathy and Social Disconnectedness


**APPENDIX**

**EXHIBIT 1: SURVEY INSTRUMENT**

This brief survey is designed to assess the psychosocial health of all students on campus. Please indicate the extent to which you agree or disagree with the following statements (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree)

**ANXIETY:**

I find working in team environments really intimidating. 1 2 3 4 5

It is hard for me to initiate conversations with other students. 1 2 3 4 5

I am often afraid of saying what is on my mind in the classroom. 1 2 3 4 5

**POWERLESSNESS:**

Even if there is something bothering me in my classes, I do not have any power to change the situation. 1 2 3 4 5

I find it difficult to concentrate in class. 1 2 3 4 5

I am often bored and sleepy in classes. 1 2 3 4 5

**SOCIAL DISCONNECTEDNESS:**

I am often lonely on campus. 1 2 3 4 5

I see myself as a loner. 1 2 3 4 5

I feel disconnected from the general campus environment. 1 2 3 4 5

Even around other students that I know, I do not feel I really belong. 1 2 3 4 5

I do not feel I participate with anyone or a group on this campus. 1 2 3 4 5

**APATHY:**

I cannot really relate to other students on this campus. 1 2 3 4 5

I always get negative feedback from other people. 1 2 3 4 5

I do not really care about being a student here. 1 2 3 4 5

I do not care much about what happens in College. 1 2 3 4 5

Attending College is not high on my priority list. 1 2 3 4 5
**TEAMWORK-RELATED LEARNING**

| I have learned a lot because I worked in teams with other students. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| I think classroom teams have enhanced my learning as a student. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| I have learned to work as a team player. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| I am generally enthusiastic about team projects. | 1 2 3 4 5 |

**ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT**

| The content of the courses I have taken has really challenged me. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| My coursework has helped me develop a meaningful philosophy of life. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| I have a better appreciation of the complexity of the real world. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| I am gaining knowledge that I will find useful in the real world. | 1 2 3 4 5 |
| I am learning the kinds of things that I believe will be useful for a career. | 1 2 3 4 5 |

My Cumulative GPA is: _____ I am a ___ Freshman ____ Sophomore ____ Junior ____ Senior

My major is: __________ My minor is: ________

My gender is: ___________ Male_________ Female

My age is (circle one): 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 or over

**EXHIBIT 2: RECOMMENDATIONS FOR INSTRUCTORS AND ADMINISTRATORS**

a. Prepare for the prevalence of the anxiety disorder likely to afflict more than 10% of college students, before they arrive on campus, and campus-related exacerbating factors including:
   a. Mismatch between ability, aptitude, motivation, and chosen field of study.
   b. Mismatch between the instructions and guidelines students receive for functioning effectively in teams, and the instructor-defined expectations of teamwork. Instructions and guidance commensurate with expectations can go a long way in reducing student anxiety.
   c. Mismatch between the millennial generation’s expectations and lifestyles and the requirements for effective learning on campus.
b. While empowerment of students has received much favorable press, efforts to empower often calls students to make decisions about course content, schedules, testing, and evaluation for which they are unprepared, and exacerbate anxiety (which lies at the root of social disconnectedness, powerlessness, and apathy).

c. Incorporate learning communities in junior and senior curriculums, and not just limit them to the freshmen and sophomore experiences.

d. Conduct orientation programs at the beginning of junior and senior years (which address issues of anxiety, powerlessness, social disconnectedness, and apathy).

e. Apathy and disconnectedness can infect the social and the learning environment in classrooms and on campus. Identify students afflicted with dysfunctional levels of apathy and disconnectedness for counseling and remedial action. Consider quarantines for the seriously afflicted; they can infect the quality of other students’ learning experiences.

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