

Assessing the Factors Associated with the Possession of an Academic Ethic in College, Kyong Hee Chee – Texas State University; Nathan W. Pino – Texas State University; William L. Smith – Georgia Southern University

Abstract

Possession of an academic ethic in college is known to result in a higher likelihood of college success, but less is known about the factors associated with the development of an academic ethic in the first place. Based on an analysis of data collected from two U.S. universities we find that in addition to race and gender, college preparatory course enrollment and high school type (public or private), as mediated by social class, are associated with the extent to which one possesses an academic ethic in high school, which in turn predicts the possession of an academic ethic in college. In addition, the results show support for the positive influence of academic mentors on the level of one's academic ethic in college, particularly for nonwhite and female students. High schools and colleges can make use of this information to better socialize students for the transition experience and college success.

Introduction

In order to succeed in college, students need certain attitudes and behaviors toward learning – what Conley (2005:165) describes as the “knowledge, cognitive skills, and habits of mind essential to postsecondary success.” Such habits of mind are similar to what Rau and Durand (2000:23) and Shils (1997:120) call the “academic ethic.” Those who possess an academic ethic “place their studies above leisure activities; study on a daily or near-daily basis; and study in a disciplined, intense, and sober fashion” (Rau and Durand 2000:23). Students with an academic ethic are more likely to be engaged at higher levels in “educationally purposeful activities” (Hu and Kuh 2002:569). The academic ethic has to be learned and can be acquired early in their educational experience. Prior research has identified the advantages of possessing an academic ethic for college students, but little is known about how sociodemographic background and educational experience in high school predict the academic ethic in college. The purpose of the present study is, therefore, to examine

the effects of race, social class, gender, high school contexts, and formal support on college students' academic ethic.

Research shows that four distinct dimensions comprise the academic ethic (Smith and Pino 2005:55). These dimensions include (a) an academic locus of control, (b) regular class attendance, (c) resisting partying and excessive drinking, and (d) rejecting the GPA-centered perspective. Students with an academic locus of control are not easily distracted or bored when studying or in class, are not easily talked out of studying, put academic work above their social lives, and study on a regular basis. Students with an academic ethic also attend class on a regular basis and resist partying and excessive drinking. Students who reject the GPA-centered perspective would take a class interesting to them even if the instructor is known to be a tough grader or requires a perceived large amount of work.

Students who reject the GPA-centered perspective are also resisting the influence of an increasingly consumer-oriented academic environment. College students increasingly view higher education as a "consumer-driven marketplace" where "learning for its own sake" is discounted (Delucchi and Korgen 2002:104). Becker, Geer, and Hughes (1968) found a similar phenomenon in the 1950s among students at a large state university and they identified it as the "GPA perspective." Becker and his colleagues found that being overly concerned with "making the grade" created behavior that hindered learning. Pope (2001:4) discovered a similar process at work among high school students who were more interested in "doing school" than engaging in deep learning (Nelson Laird, Shoup, Kuh, and Schwarz 2008).

Previous research has demonstrated that students who possess an academic ethic are much more likely to succeed in college. Smith and Pino (2005:60) determined that possession of an academic ethic was a strong predictor of grade point average. Similarly, Rau and Durand (2000:30) found that students who possessed an academic ethic earned higher grades than those who did not possess one. In addition, Pino and

Smith (2003:490) discovered that students with a greater academic ethic were less likely to be involved in acts of academic dishonesty and had higher grade point averages. In this paper, we use path analysis to focus on the factors associated with the development of an academic ethic in college, with the goal of assisting policy makers and other stakeholders to promote the academic ethic in high schools, thereby assisting students in their transition to college and increasing retention and graduation rates.

Previous Research on the Academic Ethic and the Transition to College

We need to learn more about how students transition to college (Goldrick-Rab, Carter, and Wagner 2007:2472). What is known so far is how the transition to college can be smoother when students possess an academic ethic in high school (Smith and Zhang 2009a). Deluca and Rosenbaum (2001) found that the amount of time spent on homework after school during one's high school years (demonstrating one of the dimensions of the academic ethic) had a positive and significant impact on educational attainment, independent of educational achievement, ten years later. In terms of achievement, however, Smith and Zhang (2009a:86) reported that students who possessed an academic ethic in high school tended to earn higher GPAs during their first semester of college than those who did not; and that those who had an academic ethic in high school were more likely to have an academic ethic in college than those who did not.

Tinto (1998:169) found that students who are academically and socially engaged experience a smoother transition to college and are more likely to return for their sophomore year. In this transition, college life and the academic experience during college contribute to student change (Astin 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini 2005). College impact models elaborate on social structure and the influence of institutional characteristics, student experiences, and student interactions on change, and Weidman's (1989) model of undergraduate socialization recognizes the role played by precollege and college factors in the socialization experience of college students. Importantly, however, Clark (2005:296) criticizes college impact models

because they do not address students' own perceptions of the factors that influence their transition experience.

Whereas a rigorous academic program in high school is the most important factor in making a successful transition from high school to college (Adelman 2002:40), parents, friends, high school teachers and guidance counselors, college professors and academic advisors, college orientation programs and first-year seminars also play an important role in the transition experience (Cabrera and La Nasa 2000; Hossler, Schmit, and Vesper 1999; Keup and Barefoot 2005; Kim and Schneider 2005; Tierney, Corwin, and Colyar 2005). Regarding students' perceptions about the transition from high school to college, students reporting that college professors were helpful had significantly higher GPAs (Smith and Zhang 2008). Mothers provided the most help and were the most helpful resource in the transition from high school to college. Yet, the influence of these socialization agents on students may vary by gender. For example, female students were more likely to report that mothers, friends, and high school guidance counselors were helpful (Smith and Zhang 2009b:647). Females were also more likely than males to report that certain aspects of the first-year seminar and the orientation program were helpful and that certain aspects of their relationship with college academic advisors and professors were helpful (Smith and Zhang 2009b:649). Similarly, Pino, Martinez-Ramos and Smith (2012) report that Latina (female) students, compared to their Latino (male) counterparts, found college professors and their parents or guardians to be more helpful in their transition to college.

It is important to note variations based on class, gender, race, and ethnicity concerning the possession of an academic ethic. Students with less educated parents are more likely to possess an academic ethic than students with more highly educated parents; and similarly, first generation college students are more likely to possess an academic ethic than second generation college students (Pino et al 2012; Smith and Pino 2005; Smith and Zhang 2010). These findings differ somewhat from those of Deluca and Rosenbaum (2001), who

found that students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds spent fewer hours per week doing homework in high school than those from a higher socioeconomic background. Chee, Pino, and Smith (2005) found that female college students were more likely to have an academic ethic than male students, although Pino et al. (2012) discovered that there were no significant differences between Latinas and Latinos regarding whether they possessed an academic ethic in high school or college. In terms of race, Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998:551) wrote, “If anything, African Americans maintain *more* pro-school values and are *more* likely to esteem their high-achieving peers than are whites,” but owing to structural inequalities lack “the material conditions that foster the development of skills, habits, and styles rewarded by teachers....” According to Pino and Smith’s research (2004), black students compared to their white counterparts were also more likely to display an academic ethic, though these findings may be gendered: “A substantially larger percentage of Black females than White females had a strong academic ethic, whereas the difference between Black males (6.5%) and White males (5.7%) was nonsignificant” (Zhang and Smith 2011: 839).

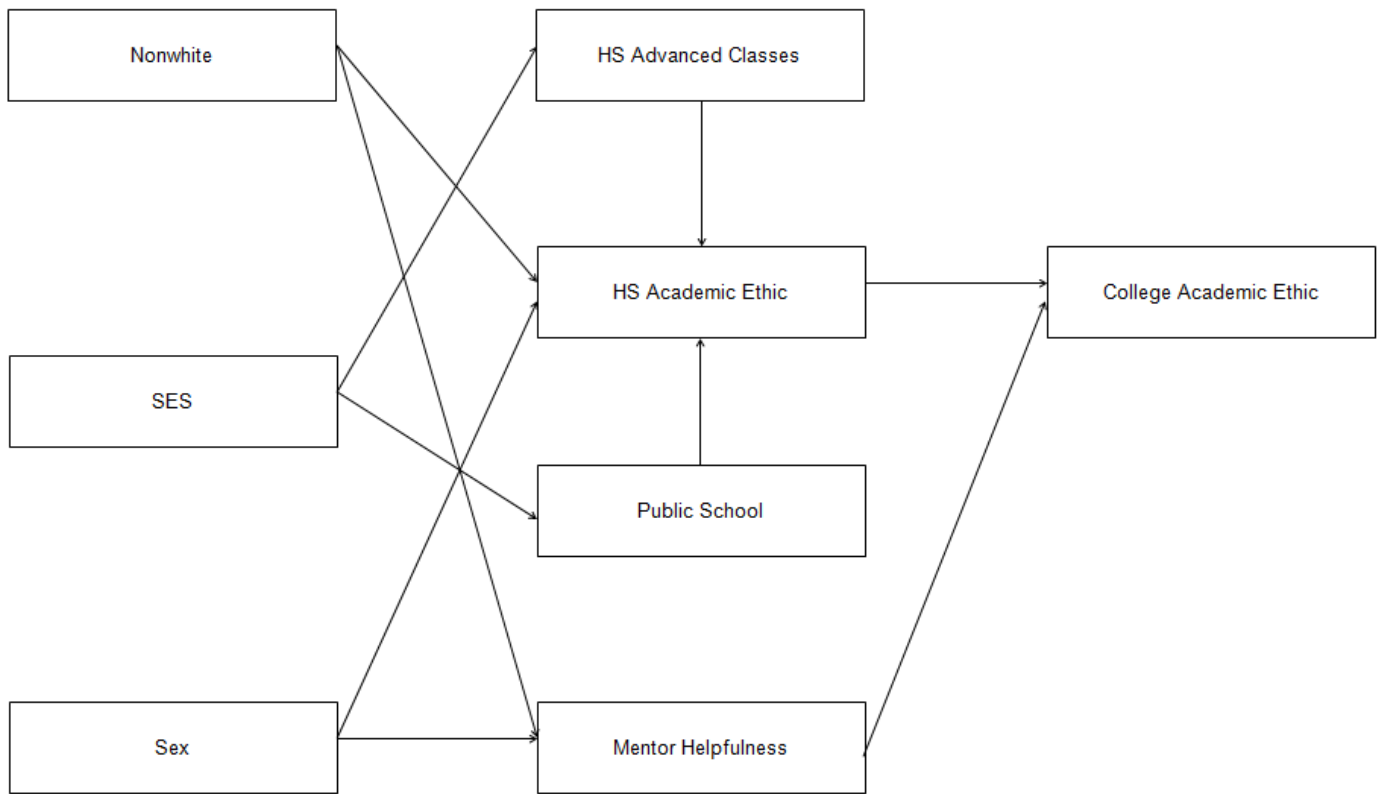
The Present Study

Building on earlier studies on the academic ethic, we propose to test a set of hypotheses that take into consideration sociodemographic background factors as well as students’ educational experience in high school and college. More specifically, this study uses path modeling to investigate the relationship between race, class, gender, different high school contexts, and their influence on the development of an academic ethic for college students. This research can offer useful insights to policy makers, administrators, and educators in higher education alike since they and the parents of students all want students to be successful in completing college within a reasonable period of time. The possession of an academic ethic seems to facilitate this outcome according to research; thus, it makes sense to identify mechanisms for the development of an academic ethic that are likely to differ by race, social class, and gender.

Simultaneous attention to the race, class, and gender characteristics of students is one of the unique aspects of the present study extending the body of literature on the academic ethic. Given the social structure of gender and racial inequality, it is possible that female and nonwhite students underestimate their academic abilities, seek out more institutional support for their academic development, and therefore perceive such support to be more beneficial than their male and white counterparts. Those who perceive the support to be helpful would more likely have an academic ethic than those who do not. Meanwhile, the higher the social class, the more likely that the student would take advanced classes in high school that help students prepare for college entrance and are more likely to promote academic ethic relative to regular classes.

Simultaneously, the lower the social class, the more likely that the student would attend a public school where the academic ethic might not be stressed as much as in private schools. Given this rationale and previous research, we have developed a path model and forward the following hypotheses (Figure 1 displays the conceptual model):

Figure 1: Conceptual Model on the Development of an Academic Ethic



H1: Nonwhites are more likely to possess an academic ethic in high school than whites.

H2: Nonwhites are more likely to find college preparation assistance from teachers, professors, counselors, and academic advising helpful than whites.

H3: Females are more likely to possess an academic ethic in high school than males.

H4: Females are more likely to find college preparation assistance from teachers, professors, counselors, and academic advising helpful than males.

H5: The higher one's socioeconomic status, the more likely she or he will take college preparatory courses

H6: The higher one's socioeconomic status, the less likely she or he will attend a public school.

H7: Those who take college preparatory courses are more likely to possess an academic ethic in high school.

H8: Those who attend private schools are more likely to possess an academic ethic in high school.

H9: Those who possessed an academic ethic in high school are more likely to possess an academic ethic in college.

H10: Those who found college preparation assistance more helpful are more likely to possess an academic ethic in college.

Data and Methods

We collected information from students at two state universities, Georgia Southern University and Texas State University; and the IRB of both institutions approved the research project. In order to gain a representative cross-section of students a survey was distributed in Introduction to Sociology classes at both institutions. The data include a disproportionate number of first-year student respondents who graduated from high school the previous spring and completed their first semester of college the following fall. Their high school and early college experiences are the most recent, and they are more likely to have better recall of these experiences than the other students. The survey was five pages long and contained thirty-nine questions, including whether students were primarily interested in learning or in "making the grade" (Becker, Geer, and Hughes 1968) and "doing school" (Pope 2001). Survey questions also assessed how much time was devoted to academic, social, and work activities during the respondents' high school years and their first semester of college.

Data collection was similar at both institutions. Georgia Southern is a Carnegie doctoral-research university with an enrollment of approximately 17,750 (15,500 of whom are undergraduates) at the time of data collection, though, current enrollment was 20,500. The survey was administered in class during the first week of the 2007 spring semester to students enrolled in 11 sections of Introduction to Sociology. A total of 775 students were enrolled in these 11 sections and 657 students (335 first-year, 205 sophomores, 78 juniors, 34 seniors, 3 others, and 2 missing) completed the survey for a response rate of 84 percent. Texas State University is a Carnegie masters-level university with an enrollment of approximately 29,000 students (25,000 of whom are undergraduates) at the time of data collection, though rapid enrollment growth had already led to a current enrollment of 34,500. The survey was administered in class during the second or third week of the 2008 spring semester to students enrolled in 7 sections of Introduction to Sociology. A total of 679 students were enrolled in these 7 sections and 523 students (262 first-year, 140 sophomore, 75 junior, 45 senior, and 1 other) completed the survey for a response rate of 77 percent.

While the data come from two convenience samples, the sample is representative of each university owing to the fact that the respondents closely match the general student population of each institution. There are a total of 1,180 respondents for this study. The sample is 57% female, 43% male, 71% white, 13% black, 10% Latino (virtually all of whom are Mexican-American), 3% multi-racial or multi-ethnic, and 3% Asian, Native American, or other. Virtually all of the black students in the sample came from Georgia Southern University (132 of 149) and most all of the Latino students came from Texas State (103 of 112).

Measures

There are eight study variables in the analysis: sex (*sex*), race (*nonwhite*), socioeconomic status (*SES*), number of advanced classes taken in high school (*HS advanced classes*), type of high school attended (*public school*), helpfulness of teachers, professors, guidance counselors, and academic advising in preparation for

college (*mentor helpfulness*), and possession of an academic ethic in high school (*HS academic ethic*) and college (*college academic ethic*). Table 1 presents the correlation matrix of these variables along with the means and standard deviations of the variables.

Dichotomous variables included *sex* (female = 0; male = 1), *nonwhite* (0 = white; 1 = nonwhite), and *public school* (0 = private; 1 = public). *SES* (socioeconomic status) was assessed by standardizing and combining the following two variables: parents combined educational level by adding mother's and father's education scores together (1 = grammar school or less and 8 = graduate/professional degree) and the household income of the respondent's parents/guardians (1 = less than \$20,000 per year and 8 = \$140,000 or more). The variable, *mentor helpfulness*, was measured by standardizing and adding four variables that assessed the perceived helpfulness of high school teachers, high school guidance counselors, college professors, and university academic advising in the research participant's transition to college ($\alpha = .53$). Those four variables were originally coded as 1 = not at all helpful and 4 = very helpful. *HS advanced classes* was computed by adding together 5 dichotomous variables that asked students if they took any of the following types of classes while in high school (0 = didn't take; 1 = took the class): college preparatory, advanced placement, honors, educational opportunity programs such as Upward Bound, and actual college courses.

In order to create a measure for a college academic ethic (*college academic ethic*), factor analysis was conducted on 29 items. Twenty-six of these items were part of a set of statements (based on a 7-item Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree) concerning class attendance, the ability to concentrate while studying, academic self-efficacy, attitudes toward studying and socializing, and whether or not the participant avoids classes known to be difficult. Three additional items asked how often the participant studied (six response categories from "never study" to "study every day, including weekends"), how often the participant

skips classes (five response categories from “about every day” to “almost never”), and whether they place a priority on social life or academics (five response categories ranging from “social life is my most important priority” to “academic work is my most important priority”).

Factor analysis was conducted on these items (using SPSS) so that the items would load onto one factor since different groupings did not result in theoretically distinct factors when multiple factors were allowed. Factor analysis was deemed appropriate based on the KMO sampling adequacy measure (.84) and Bartlett’s Test of Sphericity ($p < .0001$). Factor loadings of .4 and above were considered robust. The factor analysis did produce one factor with 18 items ($\alpha = .83$), three of which included the aforementioned questions on the priority of academics over social life, study habits, and class attendance. The other items included the following statements: I avoid teachers who are tough graders; I can easily be talked out of studying; I often end up daydreaming when I study; It is a smart move to drop a course if the teacher turns out to be a tough grader; I would rather learn a little in a course and get an A than learn a lot and get a C; Social life has impaired my academic performance at least once in a typical semester; I prefer to take intellectually demanding courses even when few students earn As in them; I am easily distracted when studying; I am often bored in class; I almost always complete assigned readings before coming to class; I often miss or skip class; I usually rely on cramming to prepare for exams and for finishing assignments; I often end up daydreaming when I am in class; I often lie when I fail to turn in assignments or when I miss class or a test so that I am not penalized for it by the instructor; and finally, It is wise to drop a class if there is a lot of work to do, even if the class seems interesting. The variable for the college academic ethic was created based on the factor scores of the items in the factor analysis.

A measure for having an academic ethic in high school (*HS academic ethic*) was also constructed in the same manner based on 24 items that were part of a set of statements similar to those used to gauge the

college academic ethic (based on a 7-item Likert scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree). Participants were asked to reflect on how they would have responded to those statements while in high school. Because high school and college are different experiences for a wide variety of reasons, we would expect that the measures constructing a high school academic ethic would not necessarily be identical to those constructing a college academic ethic. Seventeen of the 24 items loaded onto one factor. The reliability alpha for the construct was .85, the KMO measure of sampling adequacy was .88, and Bartlett's Test of Sphericity was significant ($p < .001$). These 17 items included: good time budgeting means that I do more than what is required in a course, but nothing more; I could study for an hour or more and still keep undivided attention on my homework; I worked at increasing my vocabulary by looking up new words in the dictionary; I could easily be talked out of studying; I often ended up daydreaming when I was studying; I sought out courses that involved a lot of reading, writing, and independent thought; My thought was that I would rather learn a little in a course and get an A than learn a lot and get a C; I felt it was very important for me to work on improving my intellectual skills even if this did not bring direct improvements in my academic performance; Social life and other distractions impaired my academic performance at least once in a typical semester; I preferred to take intellectually demanding courses even when few students earned As in them; I was easily distracted when studying; I was often bored in class; I almost always completed assigned readings before class; I usually relied on cramming to prepare for exams and for finishing assignments; I often ended up daydreaming in class; I tried to take very thorough notes in class; and, I often lied when I failed to turn in assignments or when I missed class or a test so that I was not penalized for it by the teacher.

The variables used in the analysis in this study (college academic ethic and HS academic ethic) were then created by conducting cluster analysis utilizing the K-means cluster procedure in SPSS to separate those who have an academic ethic and those that do not. Two clusters were created for each (0 = no academic ethic;

1 = academic ethic). T-tests confirmed that there were significant differences between the means of all of the individual variables that were used to create the academic ethic variables for each cluster, indicating that the respondents falling into each cluster are indeed distinct.

Results

Correlational coefficients suggest that all of the hypotheses are supported by the data in terms of the statistical significance of the coefficient in each of the hypothesized relationships as well as the direction of each hypothesized relationship (Table 1).

Table 1: Correlation Matrix of Observed Variables with Means/Standard Deviations (N = 1,181)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1	1							
2	-.33**	1						
3	.10**	-.05	1					
4	.002	.003	-.10**	1				
5	-.01	.06*	.06*	-.04	1			
6	.06	-.12**	-.07*	.03	-.01	1		
7	.10**	-.07*	.20**	-.09**	.09**	-.08*	1	
8	.05	-.09*	.20**	-.12**	.11**	.04	.36**	1
M/SD	.3/.5	0/1.7	0/2.6	.4/.5	1.8/1.1	.9/.3	.5/.5	.5/.5

Variables: 1 = *nonwhite*, 2 = *SES*, 3 = *mentor helpfulness*, 4 = *sex*, 5 = *HS advanced classes*, 6 = *public school*, 7 = *HS academic ethic*, and 8 = *college academic ethic*.

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

Results of the path model, which was tested utilizing SPSS AMOS software, are displayed in Table 2 and Figure 2.

Figure 2: Path Model Results (N = 1,181)

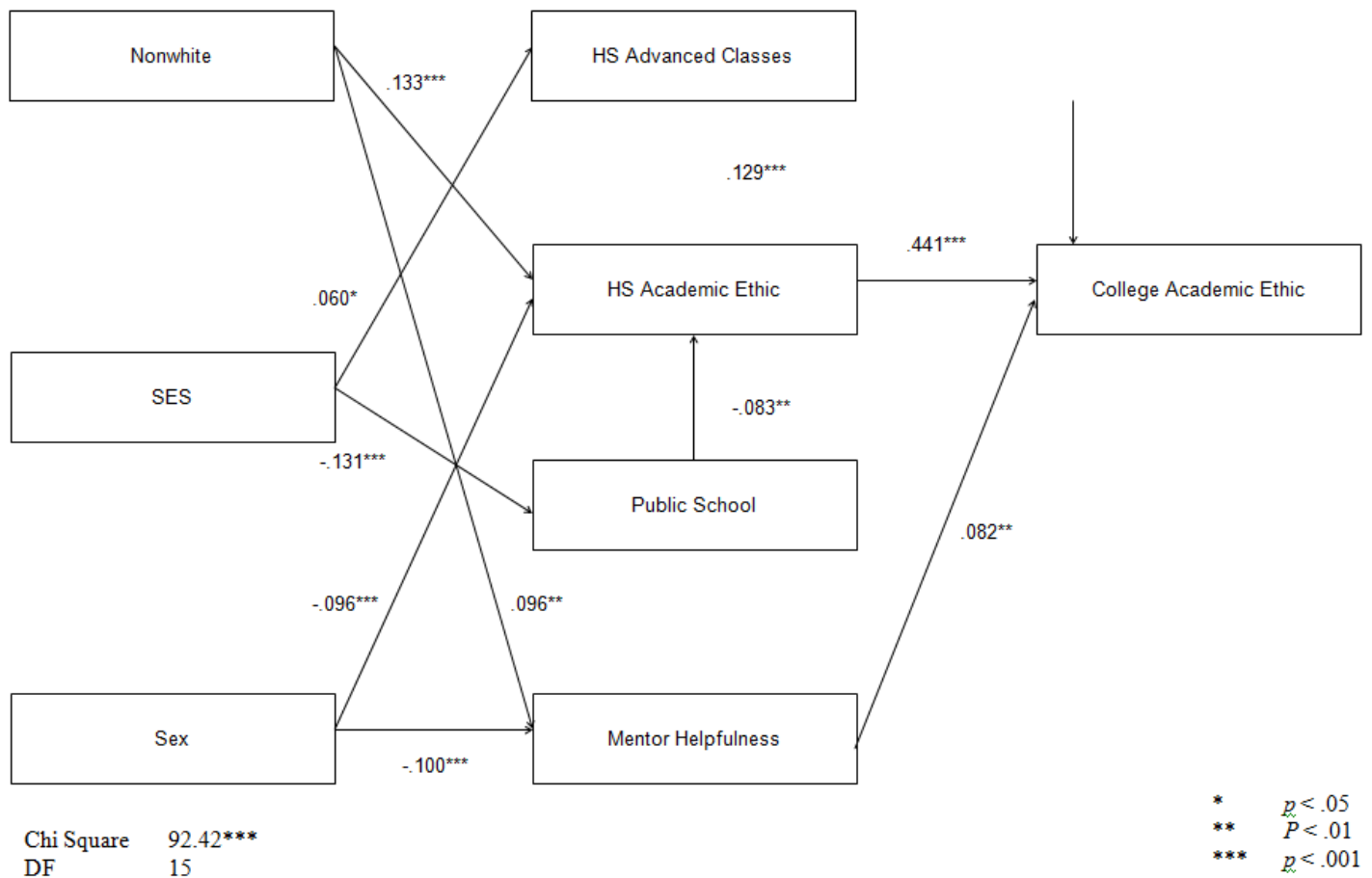


Table 2: Path Model Results (N = 1,181)

Variables	Standardized Beta	S.E.	Critical Ratio
<i>HS academic ethic</i> \leftarrow <i>nonwhite</i>	.133	.066	4.50***
<i>mentor helpfulness</i> \leftarrow <i>nonwhite</i>	.096	.167	3.30**
<i>HS academic ethic</i> \leftarrow <i>sex</i>	-.096	.060	-3.23***
<i>mentor helpfulness</i> \leftarrow <i>sex</i>	-.100	.153	-3.43***
<i>HS advanced classes</i> \leftarrow <i>SES</i>	.060	.019	1.95*
<i>public school</i> \leftarrow <i>SES</i>	-.131	.006	-4.30***
<i>HS academic ethic</i> \leftarrow <i>HS advanced classes</i>	.129	.028	4.34***
<i>HS academic ethic</i> \leftarrow <i>public school</i>	-.083	.089	-2.82**
<i>college academic ethic</i> \leftarrow <i>HS academic ethic</i> .441	.027		16.21***
<i>college academic ethic</i> \leftarrow <i>mentor helpfulness</i>	.082	.010	3.10**

Chi Square 92.42***

Df 15

*p< .05, **p< .01, ***p<.001

As expected, all of the hypotheses were supported in the predicted direction. Nonwhites and females were more likely to possess an academic ethic in high school, and found college preparatory advice from teachers, professors, guidance counselors, and academic advising more helpful. In addition, those from a higher SES background were more likely to take college preparatory courses and were less likely to attend public schools. Those who take more college preparatory courses and those who attended private schools were more likely to possess an academic ethic in high school. Finally, those with an academic ethic in high school and those who found college preparatory advice more helpful were more likely to possess an academic ethic in college.

Discussion

In this paper we sought to elucidate the factors associated with possessing an academic ethic in college. We used the data collected from students attending two state universities, and our findings from path analysis suggest that compared to whites and males, nonwhites and females are more likely to possess an academic ethic in high school and to perceive that the college preparatory advice they receive from teachers, counselors, professors and academic advising is more helpful in their transition to college. This, in turn, makes it more likely that nonwhites and females would possess an academic ethic in college. Furthermore, findings indicated that there is a positive relationship between socioeconomic status and taking college preparatory classes, and a negative relationship between socioeconomic status and attending public schools. Those who attended public schools appear less likely to have an academic ethic in high school, whereas those who take college preparatory classes appear more likely to possess an academic ethic during high school. Controlling for socioeconomic status, possessing an academic ethic in high school and obtaining helpful college preparatory advice from role models and mentors in high school and/or college mediate the relationship between minority status (being nonwhite or female) and possessing an academic ethic in college.

Unfortunately our data are cross-sectional and not representative of the U.S. college student population as a whole. That being said, almost all of the college students in our sample were of traditional college age, we oversampled first year students, and we recruited a representative proportion of racial and ethnic minorities. Since these research participants recently finished high school it can be reasonably expected that they would still have vivid memories of their high school experiences. Future research on the academic ethic and the transition to college, however, would benefit from longitudinal designs and more representative and generalizable samples.

The policy and practical implications of this and other research on the subject of academic ethic would appear rather obvious. Given the findings of this study, recommendations would include allocating more institutional resources for college preparatory courses and counseling in high schools; and academic advising services and mentoring programs in colleges. Possessing an academic ethic in high school translates into possessing the same in college, so first-year orientation courses, academic advising centers, faculty, and other relevant units on college campuses can foster the idea of an academic ethic in new and returning students. Based on our samples from Georgia and Texas, private schools appear to be doing a better job at the task of developing their students' academic preparation, though as with our other findings this cannot be generalizable to the U.S. population as a whole. That being said, public schools could do more to foster an academic ethic, offer more college preparatory courses, make them more accessible to students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and provide college preparatory counseling to all of their students regardless of race or gender.

We found that minority and female students are more likely to possess an academic ethic in high school, so efforts that attempt to reduce stereotypes held by some in education regarding the perceived limited abilities of females and minority students (see London, Ahlqvist, Gonzalez, Glanton, and Thompson

2014) can encourage students and reduce barriers to high school and college success. Female and minority students would appreciate mentoring from high school counselors and teachers in concert with parents and college professors. In particular, efforts to mentor working to lower class students as well as minority students in a non-patronizing manner should be a priority in order to improve retention.

Initiatives that foster an academic ethic across the board could also help curb the proliferation of student consumerism. Habits of mind appropriate for a successful college career do not form in a vacuum. The present study demonstrates that a supportive academic environment can make a difference in helping high school and college students acquire and enhance positive academic attitudes and educational experiences, particularly for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.

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