

Hidden Talents and Academic Engagement Among First-Year College Students: A Cross-Sectional Survey Example

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Abstract

Hidden talents are under-recognized abilities that individuals possess but may not actively display due to limited opportunities, low confidence, or lack of feedback. This sample research paper examined the relationship between hidden talent identification and academic engagement among first-year college students. Using a cross-sectional survey design (N = 220), students reported the number of hidden talents they had identified (for example, poetry writing, photography, organizing, or problem-solving) and completed a standardized academic engagement scale. Multiple regression analyses indicated that hidden talent identification significantly predicted academic engagement after controlling for grade point average, employment status, and perceived stress. Students who reported higher “hidden talent discovery” also reported stronger motivation and persistence. The findings suggest that structured talent-spotting activities may support student engagement by improving self-efficacy and identity development.

Keywords: hidden talents, self-efficacy, academic engagement, talent development, college students

Introduction

Many people have valuable abilities that remain unseen for years. These “hidden talents” can include creative strengths (such as poetry, photography, or drawing), practical capabilities (such as organization and planning), and cognitive strengths (such as strategic thinking and problem-solving). A hidden talent is not necessarily rare; it is simply under-discovered, under-practiced, or under-valued. In educational contexts, hidden talents matter because students’ beliefs about their abilities influence motivation, persistence, and overall engagement with learning activities.

Students entering college often experience academic pressure, social adjustment, and uncertainty about identity. During this transition, discovering and cultivating strengths may improve confidence and engagement. Self-efficacy theory argues that individuals’ confidence in their capacity to succeed affects effort, resilience, and performance. When students recognize strengths they did not previously label as “talent,” they may interpret challenges differently and persist longer (Bandura, 1997). Strength-based education and positive psychology also suggest that identifying personal strengths can support well-being, intrinsic motivation, and long-term goal commitment.

This paper provides a research paper example focused on a practical question: Is identifying hidden talents associated with academic engagement among first-year college students? The following hypotheses guided the study:

H1: Hidden talent identification will be positively associated with academic engagement.

H2: Hidden talent identification will predict academic engagement after controlling for perceived stress and grade point average.

Literature review

Defining hidden talents

Hidden talents are abilities that individuals possess but may not display publicly due to limited opportunities, low confidence, lack of resources, or lack of feedback. Hidden talents may be creative (for example, writing poetry, singing, photography, or embroidery), interpersonal (for example, leadership or conflict resolution), or cognitive (for example, problem-solving or strategic planning). Importantly, hidden talents can be “invisible” because they are not part of formal grading systems or because social environments do not reward them equally.

Self-efficacy and motivation

Self-efficacy refers to the belief that one can successfully perform tasks and achieve goals. People with stronger self-efficacy tend to invest more effort, persist longer, and recover faster after setbacks. When students discover strengths, they gain positive mastery experiences and more confidence, both of which can contribute to engagement. Engagement includes behavioral effort (participation and persistence), emotional involvement (interest and belonging), and cognitive investment (deep processing and self-regulation).

Strength-based approaches in education

Strength-based education emphasizes identifying and developing existing capabilities rather than focusing only on deficits. Practical interventions include reflective journaling, goal-setting exercises, and portfolio-building, which can help students recognize talents that were previously unrecognized. These approaches may increase engagement by improving students' sense of competence and control over outcomes.

Although prior research supports links between self-efficacy, identity development, and engagement, fewer studies focus specifically on hidden talent identification as a measurable

contributor. This study addresses that gap by testing whether the act of identifying hidden talents is associated with engagement among first-year students.

Methods

Design

A cross-sectional correlational survey design was used.

Participants and setting

Participants were first-year college students recruited from two introductory general education courses at a mid-sized institution. Inclusion criteria included age 18 years or older and first-year status. A total of **220** students completed the survey.

Measures

Demographics. Students reported age, gender, weekly employment hours, and current grade point average (GPA).

Perceived stress. Perceived stress was measured using a brief 4-item scale rated from 1 (never) to 5 (very often). Higher scores indicated higher stress.

Hidden talent identification (HTI). A short scale was constructed for this example study. Students selected talents they believed they had but had not consistently used or shown publicly. Examples included:

- Poetry writing
- Singing or staying in tune
- Drawing or visual design
- Photography
- Craft and embroidery
- Organization and planning

- Packing and logistics
- Problem-solving under pressure
- Strategic thinking
- Being handy (fixing and building)

Students then answered three Likert items (1–5) assessing how clearly they had identified these talents (for example, “I can describe at least one talent I have that most people do not know about”). An HTI composite score was calculated by averaging these items. Higher scores indicated clearer identification.

Academic engagement. Engagement was measured using a 9-item scale covering behavioral effort, emotional interest, and cognitive investment (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Items included “I put consistent effort into my coursework” and “I try to connect new learning to my long-term goals.”

Procedure

Students received a survey link and completed it anonymously. Participation was voluntary. Completion time was approximately 10 minutes.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics summarized the sample. Pearson correlations examined relationships among variables. Multiple linear regression tested whether HTI predicted engagement after controlling for GPA, employment hours, and perceived stress. Statistical significance was set at $p < .05$.

Results

Descriptive statistics

Participants had a mean age of 19.2 years ($SD = 1.1$). The most frequently selected hidden talents were organization/planning (46%), photography (34%), poetry writing (29%), problem-solving (28%), and drawing/design (25%). Mean engagement was moderately high.

Table

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Descriptive statistics ($N = 220$)

- Hidden talent identification (HTI): $M = 3.62$, $SD = 0.74$
- Academic engagement: $M = 3.71$, $SD = 0.68$
- Perceived stress: $M = 3.10$, $SD = 0.81$
- GPA: $M = 3.12$, $SD = 0.44$
- Employment hours/week: $M = 12.5$, $SD = 9.2$

Correlations

HTI correlated positively with engagement ($r = .43$). Stress correlated negatively with engagement ($r = -.36$). GPA correlated modestly with engagement ($r = .22$). Employment hours had a weak negative correlation with engagement ($r = -.11$).

Regression analysis

A multiple regression model including HTI, stress, GPA, and employment hours explained 34% of the variance in engagement ($R^2 = .34$). HTI remained a significant predictor ($\beta = .31$, $p < .001$) after controlling for covariates. Stress was also significant ($\beta = -.28$, $p < .001$). GPA was significant ($\beta = .14$, $p = .02$). Employment hours were not significant ($\beta = -.06$, $p = .27$).

Discussion

This sample research paper example suggests that identifying hidden talents is associated with stronger academic engagement among first-year college students. Students who reported clearer awareness of their hidden talents also reported greater effort, interest, and cognitive investment in learning. One explanation is that recognizing strengths may increase self-efficacy, helping students interpret academic challenges as manageable rather than overwhelming (Duckworth, 2016). In addition, hidden talent discovery may support identity development, giving students a broader sense of competence beyond grades alone.

The results also show that stress undermines engagement, which is consistent with common findings in student well-being research. However, HTI remained significant even after controlling for stress, implying that strength identification may serve as a protective factor (Seligman, 2011). For example, students who discover they are talented in poetry, photography, or organization may channel those talents into study routines, creative outlets, or time management systems that support persistence.

Practical implications

Colleges and instructors could integrate “talent-spotting” strategies into first-year seminars, advising, and learning support programs. Examples include:

- Short reflective prompts asking students to identify one hidden talent and how it could support learning
- Micro-assignments (one poem, one photo story, one planning template, one small project) to reveal strengths
- Portfolio activities that include creative and practical talents alongside academic achievements

- Peer sharing to normalize the idea that talents can be private, varied, and developed

These low-cost strategies may improve engagement by expanding students' sense of competence and helping them build routines that align with their natural abilities.

Limitations

This example study used a cross-sectional design, so causality cannot be inferred. Measures relied on self-report and a newly constructed HTI scale. The sample was drawn from only two courses, limiting generalizability. Future research could validate the HTI measure, use longitudinal designs, and test strength-based interventions experimentally.

Conclusion

Hidden talents are meaningful abilities that may remain unrecognized without reflection, feedback, or opportunity. In this example research paper, hidden talent identification predicted academic engagement among first-year college students after controlling for stress and academic performance. The findings support the idea that structured talent discovery activities may strengthen student motivation, identity development, and persistence.

References

Bandura, A. (1997). *Self-efficacy: The exercise of control*. W. H. Freeman.

Duckworth, A. L. (2016). *Grit: The power of passion and perseverance*. Scribner.

Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. Free Press.

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Appendix A (Optional): Hidden talent list used in the survey

Students selected any talents they believed they had but had not consistently used or shown publicly: poetry writing, singing/staying in tune, drawing/design, photography, embroidery/craft, dance, piano, organization/planning, packing/logistics, problem-solving, strategic thinking, being handy.

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