

The Impact of Utilitarian Learning Motivation on College Students' Academic Burnout

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Abstract:

The relationship between college students' utilitarian learning motivation and academic burnout has become a prominent educational phenomenon and has received widespread attention, but the specific pathways of their influence still lack sufficient research support, requiring targeted theoretical and practical solutions. This article focuses on the influence mechanism of utilitarian learning motivation on academic burnout among college students, systematically analyzes the factors that contribute to the formation of utilitarian learning motivation, and examines its multi-level impacts on the student population, higher education, and social development, clarifying the differentiated effects of its various dimensions on academic burnout. Based on the research findings, this paper offers recommendations from the perspectives of society, family, universities, and individuals: society needs to optimize the employment and education environment and guide diverse value orientations. Families should reshape their approach to scientific parenting. Universities need to improve the talent training and psychological counseling systems, while helping students change their learning motivations to alleviate academic burnout and guide them to develop a healthy approach to learning.

Keywords: Instrumental learning motivation; College students; Academic burnout; Learning perspective; Talent cultivation

1. Introduction

Competition in the current job market is intensifying, and people are more inclined to seek stable work and life. This has made taking civil service exams and postgraduate entrance exams a central external

goal for college students, highlighting a growing utilitarian motivation for studying. Driven by such an environment and societal beliefs, students lack the motivation and drive for self-directed learning. After moving away from goal-oriented learning, they often show a lack of willingness to learn independently

and a decrease in learning engagement. Over the long term, this can easily lead to problems like learning burnout, which not only affects academic performance but also limits personal development.

The link between college students' utilitarian learning motivation and academic burnout has become a prominent educational phenomenon. However, current research on the specific pathways through which utilitarian learning motivation affects academic burnout is still lacking and insufficient. Existing practical problems require targeted theoretical support and practical solutions. Therefore, this study focuses on the relationship between the two, aiming to investigate the impact mechanism of utilitarian learning motivation on academic burnout, providing a scientific reference for universities to formulate burnout intervention strategies and guide students in developing a healthy approach to learning.

On this basis, this study combines the new characteristics of current college students' learning scenarios to distill two innovative research perspectives: First, it breaks through the single-variable research framework by taking 'self-directed learning ability' as a mediating variable. Investigate how utilitarian motives indirectly lead to burnout by undermining the willingness to engage in autonomous learning, revealing the chain mechanism of 'motivation - ability - burnout'; Secondly, by introducing 'learning value cognition reconstruction' as a moderating variable, this study analyzes whether guiding students to reconstruct their understanding of the value of knowledge and the significance of personal growth can alleviate the negative impact of utilitarian motivations on academic burnout, providing a more practical entry point for intervention strategies.

2. Analysis of the Impact of Core Concept Definition and Utilitarian Learning Motivation

2.1 Definition of Concepts

2.1.1 Learning motivation

The definition of learning motivation can be divided into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation comes from an individual's interest in and satisfaction with the activity itself, while extrinsic motivation depends on external rewards or pressures. This discusses the utilitarian learning motivation in research, which, as a form of external motivation for individuals, refers to using learning as a tool to achieve external goals rather than focusing on the intrinsic enjoyment of learning itself.

The emphasis is on stopping learning immediately after achieving utilitarian goals.

2.1.2 Academic burnout

Academic burnout is a syndrome that includes three dimensions: emotional exhaustion, reduced personal efficacy, and academic disengagement. Its measurement research has clear localized research results in the country. In 'The Development of the Adolescent Learning Burnout Scale,' three targeted dimensions were constructed: 'physical and mental exhaustion (corresponding to emotional exhaustion), academic disengagement, and low sense of achievement (corresponding to reduced self-efficacy),' forming a measurement framework suited to the local context [1].

2.2 Impact

Utilitarian learning motivation is a typical form of extrinsic learning motivation for college students. Its formation and reinforcement not only directly affect students' academic performance and psychological development, but also extend to the higher education system and talent cultivation in society. This, in turn, has multifaceted effects. The following will analyze the impact of utilitarian learning motivation from three dimensions: individual college students, higher education, and social development.

2.2.1 Impact on college students

First, utilitarian learning motivation can temporarily stimulate students' engagement in learning due to clear external goals, helping them focus on core tasks such as further education and employment, and improving academic output during this specific stage of university. However, relying on external feedback and rewards in this learning model for a long time can easily diminish the intrinsic interest in active exploration, ultimately leading to problems such as a lack of willingness to learn independently and a significant drop in academic engagement once a fixed goal is no longer present. Secondly, this learning model, on one hand, triggers burnout symptoms such as emotional exhaustion, low self-efficacy, and academic disengagement. On the other hand, it can also easily lead to a mindset of 'only valuing results' in learning, focusing solely on outcomes and achievements while neglecting the exploration of knowledge depth and the development of comprehensive abilities. At the same time, this kind of pattern may trigger anxiety, depression, and other psychological issues due to excessive worry about whether goals are achieved [2]. Finally, excessively focusing on utilitarian goals can also, to some extent, inhibit the development of innovative thinking, critical thinking, and problem-solving skills [3]. This limits students' development to merely exam skills,

turning them into machines that can take tests, making it difficult for them to meet the long-term development needs of the workplace and society.

2.2.2 Impact on higher education

First, under the promotion of this model, the educational goals of universities have shifted from ‘the all-round development of individuals’ to ‘achieving higher education or employment benchmarks’. The core functions, such as cultural inheritance, character building, and value guidance, have gradually been weakened, turning education into a tool for pursuing Interest, deviating from the original purpose and positioning of higher education [4]. Secondly, this model will force teaching to shift towards utilitarian goals such as exam-oriented education. Test point drills and problem-solving templates replace in-depth interaction and thought stimulation. In terms of curriculum design, practical and exam-oriented courses are more in demand, while courses in humanities and general education are gradually marginalized, undermining the integrity of the education system [4]. In addition, this model further reinforces the evaluation mindset of ‘focusing solely on GPA and advancement rates,’ making educational assessment more data-driven and utilitarian. An excessive tendency toward datafication can deviate from the original purpose of education, neglecting the essence of humanity and the complexity of life’s growth. In summary, these factors collectively have led higher education into the dilemma of utilitarian teaching and utilitarian learning. It not only hinders the intrinsic connection between knowledge learning and holistic development, but also weakens its core ability to cultivate innovative and well-rounded talents, ultimately obstructing the high-quality development of higher education.

2.2.3 Impact on social development

First of all, cultivating a large number of ‘exam-oriented’ talents like this means that their abilities are more focused on achieving short-term goals. It is difficult to meet society’s demand for innovative, versatile, and sustainable talent, which restricts industrial upgrading and social progress [5]. Secondly, this model has driven the expansion of the extracurricular training market, increasing the financial burden on families, with numerous prep classes for civil service and graduate exams everywhere, making it difficult for the value of individuals to be clearly recognized. Finally, individual-level utilitarian learning motivation extends to the social level, reinforcing a value orientation that ‘emphasizes results over process’ and ‘values material over spiritual,’ indirectly affecting social innovation vitality and the transmission of humanistic spirit [3].

3. Factors Influencing the Formation of Utilitarian Learning Motivation

3.1 External Environmental Factors

External environmental factors mainly refer to objective external conditions such as employment competition, value orientation, and resource allocation. Promoting the formation of utilitarian learning motivation at a general level is an important external reason for the emergence of utilitarian learning motivation among college students.

3.1.1 Social level

First of all, the intensifying competition in the job market has fueled the formation of utilitarian motivations, as the current high-quality job positions are highly competitive. Educational background, certificates, and the like have become the core criteria for screening, and taking civil service exams or postgraduate entrance exams has become the main option for university students to cope with competition. It directly drove the focus of learning goals toward external career rewards, rather than intrinsic knowledge exploration.

Secondly, the singular focus on social value reinforces college students’ utilitarian perception, equating higher education with higher income and success with material achievements. This kind of mindset dominates in communication, undermining the humanistic value of learning as well as its significance for personal growth. It makes students view learning as a tool for acquiring survival capital rather than a path for self-development [6].

Finally, the uneven distribution of educational resources further amplifies the tendency toward utilitarian learning. High-quality educational resources and job opportunities are concentrated among a minority group. In order to achieve social mobility and have a better life, students from lower social strata are forced to engage in utilitarian learning to enhance their competitive advantage, creating a vicious cycle.

These social factors overlap and interact, creating an external environment that prompts college students to consciously or unconsciously take external goals as the core orientation of their learning.

3.1.2 Family-level factors

As the primary environment for individual growth, the family’s educational beliefs and expectations directly shape a student’s motivation to learn.

On one hand, the long-term instillation of a utilitarian view of learning is a key factor, with some families adopting the core educational belief that studying hard will lead to a good job and then to making a lot of money. From the

basic education stage, children are instilled with the belief that neglects the cultivation of internal interests and over-all competence [7].

On the other hand, family pressure reinforces the tendency toward utilitarian learning. Parents' high expectations for their children's academic advancement and employment often turn into specific demands for grades and educational qualifications [8]. To meet their family's expectations, children are forced to give up studying subjects they are interested in and instead focus on pragmatic goals that yield quick results. For some families, economic pressure directly ties students' studies to improving their family's condition. Use economic returns as the primary measure of learning [8].

3.2 Internal Psychological Factors

The individual-level psychological and cognitive factors determine college students' tendency to make choices when facing external environmental influences and serve as the internal drive for the formation of utilitarian learning motivation.

Firstly, the lack of a sense of self-determination gives rise to utilitarian dependence. According to self-determination theory, some college students lack clear career plans and intrinsic interests, making it difficult for them to gain a sense of autonomy and belonging from their studies [9]. They can only rely on external goals such as job security and material rewards to motivate their learning.

Secondly, low academic self-efficacy can lead to a utilitarian approach. Some students lack confidence in their own learning abilities, believing that interest-driven deep learning is unlikely to be effective [10]. Instead, they choose a short-term, results-oriented learning approach, relying on exam skills to gain external recognition and alleviate anxiety about their abilities [10].

Finally, peer pressure triggers utilitarian conformity. College students are in a period of intense group interaction, and the attention and comparison among classmates regarding civil service exams, postgraduate studies, and employment salaries create pressure [8]. To avoid being marginalized, individuals may also actively follow the trend and choose utilitarian learning paths.

4. Suggestion

4.1 Social Level

First, improve the employment market and talent evaluation system. Expand the supply of high-quality job opportunities through policies, such as encouraging emerging industries to absorb university graduates and promoting

talent development programs in small and medium-sized enterprises. At the same time, establish a diversified evaluation system based on 'education, ability, and literacy', weakening the logic of selecting candidates solely based on academic qualifications. The implementation of this measure can directly reduce the utilitarian nature of employment competition, lessen the anxiety among college students caused by job educational requirements, and consequently curb the choice of utilitarian learning, aligning with the current industry upgrades' demand for diverse talents.

Secondly, guide the transformation of social value orientations. Use mainstream media and public service campaigns to promote the concepts of 'holistic development' and 'interest-driven' learning. For example, showcasing the spirit of exploration of researchers and the diverse development paths of outstanding graduates through documentaries, breaking the single perception that 'higher education = higher income'. Such publicity can gradually reverse society's one-sided perception of the value of learning, provide external theoretical support for college students to establish a healthy learning perspective, and many local cultural, tourism, and education departments have already used similar publicity to enhance public recognition of quality education [11].

Finally, promote the balanced allocation of educational resources. Increase financial investment and support for faculty in central and western regions and private universities, establish a platform for sharing high-quality educational resources, and gradually narrow the educational gap between different groups. Resource balancing can reduce the tendency of disadvantaged students to engage in utilitarian learning to pursue social mobility and avoid vicious cycles. This approach has already been proven effective in the development of compulsory education and can gradually be extended to higher education.

4.2 Family Level

As the primary setting for individual development, the family needs to reduce the negative impact of utilitarian learning motivations through changes in mindset and adjustments in communication.

On one hand, change the perception of utilitarian education. Parents need to abandon the simple notion that 'learning = a tool for making a living' and, through participating in family education seminars and reading parenting books, understand 'the value of cultivating interests for long-term development.' For example, focus on children's curiosity and desire to explore in their professional studies, rather than just concentrating on grades and outcomes. This shift can reduce students' external goal pressure from

the source. Research has shown that students who have long been raised with an ‘interest-oriented’ approach have a 37% higher willingness to engage in self-directed learning compared to those raised under a utilitarian approach, proving the positive effect of this practice in alleviating burnout [12].

On the other hand, adjust expectations and communication methods. Parents need to avoid directly passing the pressure of advancing in school or finding a job onto their children, give them space to make their own choices, and acknowledge their efforts in the learning process rather than just praising the results. This kind of communication can alleviate students’ psychological burden, reduce the sense of personal inefficacy caused by ‘not meeting family expectations,’ and aligns with the psychological theory that ‘positive feedback promotes intrinsic motivation,’ effectively lowering the risk of academic burnout [13].

4.3 Individual and University Levels

As the main entity for implementing education, universities need to provide support to students through system optimization, while individuals need to proactively adjust their cognition and behavior; the combination of the two can directly affect learning motivation and burnout.

4.3.1 Universities

Universities need to address the problems caused by utilitarian learning from two aspects: curriculum design and psychological support. In terms of curriculum and training program optimization, increase the proportion of general education and practical innovation courses, such as offering courses like ‘Interdisciplinary Thinking Training’ and ‘Social Issues Research,’ combining knowledge acquisition with real-world needs and interest exploration, thereby enhancing the intrinsic value of learning. These courses allow students to gain a sense of autonomy through exploration. At the same time, special lectures on “Learning Motivation Adjustment” and “Career Planning” are offered, inviting industry professionals and psychology experts to share their experiences, helping students clarify their learning goals and career directions. This measure can address the problem of students having unclear career plans and reduce the reliance on external motivation caused by uncertainty about their goals. In building the psychological counseling platform, personalized interventions are carried out for groups with a high incidence of academic burnout, using group counseling, one-on-one consultations, and other methods to help students enhance their sense of self-determination and academic self-efficacy [14]. The professional resources of university psychological counseling centers can provide students with scientific guidance.

4.3.2 Individual

College students need to exercise their initiative, reduce reliance on pragmatism both cognitively and in their actions, and improve their ability to resist burnout. In terms of cognitive adjustment, actively learn knowledge related to self-determination theory and, by finding the areas that truly interest you, balance external goals with internal interests [9]. This kind of self-reflection can enhance the awareness of autonomous learning and prevent neglecting the value of personal growth due to an excessive focus on utilitarian goals. In practice, students can try participating in clubs or activities that interest them, as well as research projects. For example, students could join academic societies related to their major or work as a research assistant for a teacher, experiencing the joy and meaning of learning through hands-on practice. Strengthening intrinsic motivation through practical actions can gradually reduce dependence on external rewards, while also enhancing innovative thinking and problem-solving skills, laying a foundation for meeting workplace and societal demands [3].

5. Conclusion

This study focuses on the relationship between college students’ utilitarian learning motivation and academic burnout, systematically reviewing the core concepts of both. The study analyzed the factors influencing the formation of utilitarian learning motivation, its multidimensional impact on individual college students, higher education, and social development, and developed targeted strategies. The core research findings and conclusions are as follows:

Utilitarian learning motivation belongs to extrinsic motivation, with the core idea of using learning as a tool to achieve goals such as employment competitiveness, career development, and external rewards, and stopping learning once those goals are reached. Academic burnout is a syndrome that includes emotional exhaustion, reduced personal efficacy, and academic disengagement.

The formation of this motivation is the result of the combined effects of external environment and internal psychology: at the social level, factors such as employment competition, a single value orientation, and uneven educational resources, and at the family level, utilitarian views and high expectations, constitute the external reasons; College students’ lack of self-determination, low academic self-efficacy, and tendency to conform are internal driving factors.

Its impact is multidimensional: for college students, utilitarian learning motivation can stimulate learning engage-

ment in the short term, but in the long run, it may lead to a decline in intrinsic interest, academic burnout, and hinder the development of comprehensive abilities. For higher education, it can lead to a shift in educational objectives and an exam-oriented approach to teaching. For society, it would foster exam-oriented talents, restrict industrial upgrading and social innovation, and reinforce utilitarian values.

Therefore, this study puts forward multi-level recommendations: society needs to optimize the employment ecosystem, guide diverse values, and balance educational resources. Families need to change their educational concepts, adjust their expectations, and improve communication methods; universities need to enhance their talent development systems and establish psychological counseling platforms. College students should actively adjust their mindset and strengthen their intrinsic motivation. Future research could further expand the sample size and compare the differences in how utilitarian learning motivation affects academic burnout among college students of different disciplines and grade levels.

It is also possible to further explore the moderating role of mediating variables such as learning engagement and teacher-student interaction in the relationship between the two, to further enrich the theoretical framework and practical approaches in this field.

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