

Anti-Intellectual Attitudes and Academic Self-Efficacy Among Business Students

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ABSTRACT. *Anti-intellectualism* refers to a student's lack of interest in and disrespect for intellectual pursuits and critical thinking and a preference for an education experience that is practical and requires only memorization. *Academic self-efficacy* refers to a student's confidence in his or her ability to succeed in challenging academic tasks. The author investigated the extent of anti-intellectual attitudes and academic self-efficacy among 666 business students in 3 universities. The results showed an average attitude of anti-intellectualism and only a moderate level of self-efficacy among these anti-intellectual students. Students with high academic self-efficacy had low anti-intellectualism attitudes. Demographic differences also emerged that have consequences for educators.

Keywords: anti-intellectualism, business students, self-efficacy

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Anti-intellectualism is a psychological variable that was introduced in the literature by Hofstadter (1963). However, it had not been operationalized until recently. Limited research has investigated the impact of this variable. It refers to an individual's lack of interest in and disrespect for what is termed *the life of the mind*. Several researchers have asserted that anti-intellectualism is a widespread feature of American culture (e.g., Shaffer, 1981). In an academic environment, a student who is high in anti-intellectualism can have serious problems in adjusting to college and achieving success (Hook, 2004). Self-efficacy is another psychological variable that has not received considerable attention in the education literature. In a general context, it refers to an individual's confidence in his or her ability to achieve success in a particular task. In an academic setting, it refers to a student's belief that he or she can succeed in challenging exams and projects (Bandura, 1977).

In the present study, I examined the extent of anti-intellectual attitudes among business students and related it to academic self-efficacy. This study is the first to investigate anti-intellectualism among business students. If such negative attitudes are found among future business professionals, they can have serious consequences on the advancement of knowledge in the field. The

study also introduces a link between a student's level of self-confidence (academic self-efficacy) and his or her level of anti-intellectualism. Demographics are also examined as possible determinants of both variables.

Following this introduction is a section on background regarding the limited research that has been conducted on anti-intellectualism and self-efficacy, with a focus on academic environments. That section precedes a discussion of the present study's research design and sample selection. Last, I present the study's conclusions along with possible consequences and potential for research in this area.

BACKGROUND AND HYPOTHESES

Anti-intellectualism

Hofstadter (1963) presented a pioneering study that introduced the concept of anti-intellectualism in the general population. He argued that anti-intellectualism was a prominent and widespread feature of American culture. Hofstadter saw American anti-intellectualism as compatible with the technical and vocational objectives of higher education but hostile toward intellectual thought and the academic professionals who represent it. Shaffer (1981) defined *anti-intellectualism* as a preference for

recipe knowledge and learning that is fact-oriented, memorized, and routine. It entails a disinterest and disrespect for intellectual and academic objectives of 4-year university programs, such as theoretical, hypothetical, and intellectual pursuits, as well as critical thinking and academic research. Howley (2002) argued that in an anti-intellectual culture, most students would be anti-intellectual as would most teachers and employers. Those individuals whose experiences had led them to intellectual pursuits would constitute a distinct minority (Howley). Eigenberger (2002) agreed with this interpretation and noted that attaining the American dream may require intelligence, cunning, or the ability to endure 30 years of manual labor, but it did not require intellectualism.

Few researchers have tried to investigate the causes of anti-intellectualism in American culture. Long (1996) attributed anti-intellectualism to the American tradition that glorifies the person's possessing practical knowledge and the realization that a degree no longer guarantees success or even a job. Berube (1996) attributed the rise of anti-intellectualism to the public's negative perception of universities and faculty, as portrayed in Hollywood. He argued that such perception was fueled by the media's feeding frenzy over political correctness, public confusion about academic work, and distrust of tenure. Wacquant (1996) simply attributed anti-intellectualism to the unquestioned supremacy of economic capital over cultural capital in American society. This is especially true in the business world.

Even though anti-intellectualism was introduced as a psychological variable decades ago (Hofstadter, 1963), it has only recently been operationalized by Eigenberger and Sealander (2001), and very limited empirical-research literature exists regarding its determinants or consequences. Hook (2004) examined the impact of students' anti-intellectualism on their adjustment to college. He found that anti-intellectual students were less likely to academically adjust to college and form attachments to their institutions. Such students were at much higher risk for underachievement,

failure, and attrition. However, no link was found between anti-intellectualism and social or emotional adjustment to college. No researcher has investigated demographic factors as potential determinants of anti-intellectualism.

The present study is also the first to focus on anti-intellectualism among business students. Examining business students is important because Wacquant (1996) attributed anti-intellectualism to the American corporate ideals of valuing economic capital and because business students constitute future business leaders. Because of the lack of research in this field, the following hypothesis is tested in the null form:

Hypothesis 1 (H₁): There are no differences in business students' anti-intellectualism attitudes that are based on gender, age, class grade, selected major, and GPA.

Academic Self-Efficacy

Bandura (1977) defined *self-efficacy* as "a self evaluation of one's competence to successfully execute a course of action necessary to reach desired outcomes" (p. 195). Bandura (1986) argued that a person with high self-efficacy may effectively manage difficult tasks with appropriate tools and training. Such high self-efficacy leads the person to undertake challenging tasks that are realistic and provide motivation for success. On the other hand, individuals with low self-efficacy visualize scenarios that undermine performances and dwell on things that can go wrong (Bandura, 1986). Self-efficacy is a multidimensional construct that must be evaluated in the domain of the proposed task (Zimmerman, 2000). For example, J. E. Weber, P. S. Weber, Schneider, and Sleeper (2007) found that students' self-efficacy toward service had a positive impact on civic behaviors of volunteerism and charitable giving. Therefore, academic self-efficacy should be studied in the context of academic institutions because the tasks consist of exams, projects, and papers. Students with high academic self-efficacy would have confidence in their ability to succeed on exams, even challenging ones, and to write term papers.

Researchers have investigated the consequences of academic self-efficacy.

Chemers, Hu, and Garcia (2001) found that high levels of academic self-efficacy were associated with lower levels of stress in college. They argued that students with low academic self-efficacy viewed external demands, such as exams and projects, as threats and therefore reacted with higher levels of stress. This relation was also confirmed by Zajacova, Lynch, and Espenshade (2005). Numerous researchers found a significant relation between academic self-efficacy and performance in college. Multon, Brown, and Lent (1991) conducted a meta-analysis of such studies and found that the effect size of the relation between academic self-efficacy and performance was .38 and that it was .34 for the relation between academic self-efficacy and persistence in college. Such relations varied by achievement status. Stronger relations were found among low-achieving students (.56) compared with high-achieving students (.33). These results suggested that low-achieving students can benefit more from an increase in academic self-efficacy (Multon et al.). More recent evidence by Robbins, Lauver, Lee, and Davis (2004) confirmed these findings. Chemers et al. (2001) also found this relation particularly strong among freshmen students because in addition to academic performance, academic self-efficacy was also related to their ability to respond to the demands of college life. Elias and Loomis (2000) also noted that students with low academic self-efficacy were more likely to change majors more often than students with high self-efficacy. In addition, further research by Freeman, Anderman, and Jensen (2007) found that students' sense of belonging was associated with high academic self-efficacy.

Few researchers have investigated the determinants of academic self-efficacy. Hackett, Betz, Casas, and Rocha-Singh (1992) determined that vocational interests and low levels of stress were important determinants of academic self-efficacy. Multon et al. (1991) noted that academic self-efficacy was likely to differ among different types of students. However, no researcher has investigated the potential impact of demographic characteristics on the level of academic self-efficacy.

The following hypothesis is therefore tested in the null form:

H_2 : There are no significant differences in the level of business students' academic self-efficacy that are based on gender, age, class grade, major, or GPA.

Studying business students' academic self-efficacy is important because these students are future corporate managers and will frequently have to make challenging and risky decisions. In the present study, I also examined the relation between anti-intellectualism and academic self-efficacy. Angell (2006) conducted a study to determine the effect of academic self-efficacy on students' motivation to learn. The results indicated that students with high academic self-efficacy learned for pleasure and satisfaction and that they were reinforced by feeling intelligent. On the basis of these preliminary findings, I theorized a negative relation between academic self-efficacy and anti-intellectualism. Therefore, the following hypothesis was tested:

H_3 : Business students with high academic self-efficacy are less likely to possess anti-intellectual attitudes compared with students with low academic self-efficacy.

METHOD

Sample

The sample comprised undergraduate and graduate business students in three Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business-accredited universities in the western, mountain, and northeastern regions of the United States. A survey was administered during a 1-year period to students in many different sections of various business courses. Participation was voluntary, and students were assured of confidentiality. Overall, a total of 692 students participated in the study. After eliminating surveys that were missing answers, the useable sample consisted of 666 students. Several demographic questions were in the questionnaire, which took approximately 15 min to complete. Anonymity was guaranteed.

Measures

To measure anti-intellectualism, the questionnaire developed by Eigenberger and Sealander (2001) was used (see the present Appendix). Eigenberger and Sealander developed 25 questions that asked the respondents about their anti-intellectual attitudes. Each student recorded his or her agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). Examples of statements are the following: "I don't like to take courses that are not related to my goals after graduation" and "Learning a lot of theories is fine for some people, but I would rather go out and *do* things." Eigenberger and Sealander extensively tested the questionnaire using many different samples of students. They found the scale to be significantly correlated with openness to experience, authoritarianism, dogmatism, and the desire to adopt surface-level learning styles. Reliability of the original scale was reported as .91. In the present study, it was .88.

To measure academic self-efficacy, I used the scale developed by Chemers et al. (2001), which was based on Bandura (1997). Leach, Queirolo, Voe, and Chemers (2003) refined this scale to fit the college environment. The scale consisted of eight statements, and the student recorded his or her agreement with each statement on a 7-point Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*definitely not true of me*) to 7 (*definitely true of me*).

Examples of statements were the following: "I am good at researching and writing college papers" and "I am very capable at succeeding at the university." Original reliability was reported at .81. In the present study, it was .85.

RESULTS

The first step in the analysis was to compare the students in the three universities that I surveyed to determine if they possessed different characteristics. A comparison of means on anti-intellectualism and academic self-efficacy yielded no significant differences among the three groups; therefore, they were combined in the following analyses.

Table 1 presents the breakdown of the sample demographics. The sample com-

prised approximately the same number of men and women. There were more younger (traditional, ≤ 25 years old) students compared with older (non-traditional, > 25 years old) students. Regarding class grade, the majority of the students were juniors and seniors, preceding sophomores and freshmen. There were fewer freshmen and sophomores because they do not take business classes often and are typically concentrating on their general education classes. Also, many freshmen and sophomores have not yet selected a business major. There were also 84 master of business administration students in the sample. Most participants were accounting majors, and the remainder were (in order of the majors with the most students) management, marketing, finance, management information system (MIS), general business, or economics majors. There were 29 undeclared majors and 38 nonbusiness majors.

Overall, students had an average anti-intellectualism score of 3.84 (out of 7.00), and they scored 5.07 (out of 7.00) on the academic self-efficacy scale. Their average GPA was 3.07 (out of 4.00). Table 2 presents the analysis of differences in anti-intellectualism and academic self-efficacy based on demographics. I performed an ANOVA and a post hoc comparison of means on the significant variables.

In regard to anti-intellectualism, the results indicated no significant differences in anti-intellectualism between male and female students. Nontraditional students had lower anti-intellectualism attitudes than did traditional students. Juniors and seniors had lower anti-intellectualism attitudes than did freshmen and sophomores, and graduate students had anti-intellectualism scores similar to freshmen and sophomores. Undeclared majors had the highest anti-intellectualism attitudes, followed by accounting, management, and marketing majors. Economics majors had the lowest anti-intellectualism scores. Using correlation analysis, I also found that GPA was negatively correlated with anti-intellectualism ($r = -.06$), indicating that students with lower GPAs had higher anti-intellectual attitudes. This correlation was significant at $p < .10$.

TABLE 1. Sample Demographic Characteristics (N = 666)

Variable	n
Gender	
Male	330
Female	336
Age	
Traditional (≤ 25 years)	421
Nontraditional (> 25 years)	245
Grade	
Freshman	38
Sophomore	91
Junior	269
Senior	184
Graduate	84
Major	
Accounting	152
Finance	89
Economics	30
Management	115
Marketing	98
MIS	69
General business	46
Undeclared	29
Nonbusiness	38

Note. MIS = management information system.

Regarding academic self-efficacy, no significant differences were found between male and female students. Nontraditional students had higher academic self-efficacy than did traditional students, and graduate students had the highest levels of academic self-efficacy, followed by seniors, juniors, sophomores, and freshmen. Economics majors had the highest levels of academic self-efficacy, followed by MIS and nonbusiness majors. Marketing and undeclared majors had the lowest academic self-efficacies. Using correlation analysis, I also found that GPA was significantly correlated with academic self-efficacy ($r = .10$), indicating that students with lower GPAs had lower academic self-efficacy. This correlation was significant at $p < .01$.

To examine the relation between anti-intellectualism attitudes and academic self-efficacy, correlation analysis was used. There was a significant negative correlation between these two variables ($r = -.32$; $p < .01$). This indicates that students exhibiting high academic self-efficacy were least likely to have anti-intellectual attitudes. Therefore, H_3 is supported.

TABLE 2. Demographics, Anti-Intellectualism, and Academic Self-Efficacy

Variable	M	SD
<i>Panel A: Anti-intellectualism attitudes</i>		
Gender		
Male	3.78	.41
Female	3.76	.69
Age		
Traditional (≤ 25 years)	3.86**	.59
Nontraditional (> 25 years)	3.64**	.35
Grade		
Freshman	3.85*	.80
Sophomore	3.92*	.90
Junior	3.70*	.79
Senior	3.63*	.43
Graduate	3.88*	.35
Major		
Accounting	3.84*	.70
Finance	3.80*	.91
Economics	2.76*	.87
Management	3.84*	.36
Marketing	3.85*	.60
MIS	3.62*	.28
General business	3.75*	.46
Undeclared	4.17*	.69
Nonbusiness	3.76*	.63
<i>Panel B: Academic self-efficacy</i>		
Gender		
Male	5.08	.89
Female	5.10	.76
Age		
Traditional (≤ 25 years)	4.82***	.56
Nontraditional (> 25 years)	5.27***	.86
Grade		
Freshman	4.65**	.56
Sophomore	4.80**	.39
Junior	5.13**	.83
Senior	5.35**	.63
Graduate	5.42**	.67
Major		
Accounting	5.14**	.43
Finance	5.05**	.75
Economics	5.81**	.56
Management	5.44**	.81
Marketing	4.92**	.63
MIS	5.36**	.29
General Business	4.90**	.57
Undeclared	4.81**	.79
Nonbusiness	5.23**	.59

Note. Anti-intellectualism: 1 = strongly disagree, 7 = strongly agree. Academic self-efficacy: 1 = definitely not true of me, 7 = definitely true of me; MIS = management information system.
* $p < .10$. ** $p < .05$. *** $p < .01$.

Discussion

In the present study, I investigated the extent of anti-intellectualism attitudes and academic self-efficacy among business students. I also explored the effect of demographic factors on both variables. Several significant results

emerged. Business students had average anti-intellectual attitudes. Although these results are preliminary, they are somewhat disturbing, especially because sampled nonbusiness majors had lower anti-intellectualism than most business majors. Wacquant (1996) argued that a

reason for anti-intellectualism in American society was the corporate culture that valued economic capital over cultural capital. Accounting and management majors scored higher than other business majors on anti-intellectualism. Undeclared majors had the highest anti-intellectualism scores, indicating their uncertainty in selecting a major. Nontraditional students had lower anti-intellectual attitudes than traditional students. This relation also appeared when analyzing class grade differences, where anti-intellectualism declined as students moved closer to graduation. However, the finding that graduate students had anti-intellectualism scores that were similar to those of freshmen is particularly surprising, although conceptually in line with previous research. Graduate students are typically exposed to more theory, and critical thinking skills are emphasized in graduate classes. Therefore, some students may have difficulty in adjusting to this environment and may eventually develop anti-intellectual attitudes. Instructors and administrators should help all business students, especially undeclared majors, graduate students, and freshmen, minimize their anti-intellectual attitudes. This can be accomplished through class discussion and an explanation of the role of academics and value of academic research to practical business applications.

Regarding academic self-efficacy, nontraditional students had higher self-efficacy than traditional students. This conclusion also emerged because the results showed self-efficacy increasing as students progressed through their degree, with just-graduated students exhibiting the highest academic self-efficacy. Undeclared majors had the lowest academic self-efficacy, and that finding is consistent with research that showed that students with low academic self-efficacy often switched majors during their college years (Elias & Loomis, 2000). However, the finding that non-business majors had higher academic self-efficacy than most business majors is also disturbing because these future leaders will have to make many chal-

lenging and risky business decisions in their career.

The present study also showed that anti-intellectualism was related to academic self-efficacy and that both variables were related to academic performance. Students with high academic self-efficacy and therefore more confidence in their academic abilities were less likely to have anti-intellectual attitudes. These students appeared to enjoy their studies and other intellectual pursuits. In addition, the present study showed a moderate relation between GPA and anti-intellectualism and a strong relation between academic self-efficacy and academic performance, with results that were consistent with previous research (e.g., Chemers et al., 2001).

There are many possibilities for future research in anti-intellectualism and academic self-efficacy. Future researchers should compare business students to other students on a much larger scale and examine further determinants of anti-intellectualism. Instructors and administrators should focus their attention on understanding this phenomenon and the potential remedies available to minimize it. Similar studies should also be conducted regarding academic self-efficacy and methods to increase it, because research (e.g., Chemers et al., 2001) shows a consistent link between academic self-efficacy and academic performance.

NOTE

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APPENDIX
Survey Instrument

Please answer the following questions according to the following scale (adapted from M. E. Eigenberger & K. A. Sealander, 2001).

- | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 |
|--------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------|
| <i>Strongly disagree</i> | <i>Moderately disagree</i> | <i>Slightly disagree</i> | <i>Neutral agree</i> | <i>Slightly agree</i> | <i>Moderately agree</i> | <i>Strongly agree</i> |
- _____ I see college as a necessary evil—it is the price I have to pay to find a good job.
- _____ Many of my college courses are a waste of time for me.
- _____ I would like to deepen my intellectual pursuits after graduation.
- _____ I don't like taking courses that are not directly related to my goals after college.
- _____ I enjoy researching new topics and solving intellectual problems.
- _____ I prefer courses offering practical skills over liberal arts kinds of courses.
- _____ I would rather just pay money for a diploma than have to take so many useless courses.
- _____ It is always worthwhile to study subjects like philosophy, history, and educational theory.
- _____ A big reason I am in college is that I value learning for its own sake.
- _____ Some college professors are alright, but as a whole I don't care much for them.
- _____ I enjoy courses that require research, writing and critical evaluation.
- _____ Learning a lot of theories is fine for some people, but I would rather go out and do things.
- _____ Some professors are too intellectual and often bore me with their abstractions.
- _____ The main problems in life require clear and direct answers, not intellectual theorizing.
- _____ Requirements to take humanities and liberal arts courses should be reduced or eliminated.
- _____ Generally speaking, professors need to be more interesting.
- _____ I prefer classes where thought-provoking issues are discussed with the professor.
- _____ I prefer classes without a lot of critical thinking or analytic activities.
- _____ I become bored in my classes when discussions seem to get too abstract and hypothetical.
- _____ Overall, I find my college courses stimulating and rewarding.
- _____ I pay tuition and feel it is the professor's job to give me what I need to graduate.
- _____ I often feel angry toward many of my professors.
- _____ I appreciate a teacher's depth of knowledge more than how entertaining they are.

(appendix continues)

APPENDIX (cont.)

_____ I am not interested in hearing students and the professor discuss philosophical issues.

_____ I am in a hurry to get my education over with.

Regardless of the previous statements, please indicate how true is each of the following statements for you (adapted from C. W. Leach, S. S. Queirolo, S. D. Voe, & M. Chemers, 2003).

1 2 3 4 5 6 7
Definitely NOT *Neutral* *Definitely*
true of me *true of me*

_____ I know how to schedule my time to accomplish my academic tasks.

_____ I know how to take notes in college classes.

_____ I know how to study to perform well on college tests.

_____ I am good at researching and writing college level papers.

_____ I am a very good student.

_____ I usually do very well in school and at academic tasks.

_____ I typically find my academic work interesting and absorbing.

_____ I am very capable of succeeding at the university.

**Finally, please answer the following important demographic questions.
Your anonymity is guaranteed.**

Gender: _____ Male _____ Female

Age: _____ ≤ 25 years old _____ > 25 years old

Major: _____ Accounting
_____ Finance
_____ Economics
_____ Management
_____ Marketing
_____ Management information systems
_____ General business
_____ Undeclared major
_____ Nonbusiness major (Please indicate _____)

Grade: _____ Freshman
_____ Sophomore
_____ Junior
_____ Senior
_____ Graduate student

Approximate cumulative GPA: _____ / 4.00

Thank you very much for your time and participation.

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