

## **Inherent Factors that Contribute to BEI Learners' Academic Success at UNA**

### **Introduction**

Academic success in higher education has been one of the most paramount concerns for college administrators, educators, and students through history. Worldwide, college learners' pivotal goal is to attain their academic aims and graduate as the best professionals. Therefore, one of the main objectives of higher education is to ensure student success by providing high quality in education, including higher levels of institutional commitment, satisfaction with faculty, encouragement and guidance. This kind of university culture contributes to making learners actively involved in their learning, a key element for academic achievement. The aim of this paper is to analyze the factors that contribute to academic success for third and fourth level-students of the BEI at UNA.

### **I. Context at UNA**

Part of the mission of the ELCL<sup>1</sup> is to contribute to the development of the country with the knowledge of areas such as linguistics, literature, second language teaching and translation. With this university commitment, administrators and educators should provide students with an adequate environment to allow them succeed in their academic work and professional life.

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<sup>1</sup> Escuela de Literatura y Ciencias del Lenguaje

The Strategic Plan at the ELCL (Objective A.5. p.7, 2006) states the need to create a program of university life in order to take advantage of free time and which encourages students to commit to their university studies in order to prevent desertion. Another factor in this concern is professors' influence in students' professional life, and Element D (p. 8) of the Pedagogic Module of UNA establishes respect, tolerance and dialogue in the learners' and professors' relationship.

The BEI is also an accredited major from SINAES<sup>2</sup> that certifies quality in the following components: curriculum, faculty, learners, administrative staff, infrastructure, and university services. The requirement to keep this accreditation is the constant improvement of all the constituents that help create a success-oriented campus culture and learning environment.

UNA offers a humanistic curriculum that concentrates on the development of the students as creators of their own learning. In humanism, learning is student centered and personalized where affective and cognitive needs are met in order to develop self-actualized people in a cooperative, supportive environment. As well it promotes student-centered classrooms where learners have the opportunity to reinvent, participate freely and work on problem-solving and decision-making tasks.

In order to assure the students' transformation into creative and critical individuals, educators' role include the responsibility to commit to their students. The quality of the education a learner receives is the excellence of professors.

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<sup>2</sup> Sistema Nacional de Acreditación de la Educación Superior

Teaching demands broad knowledge of subject matter, curriculum and standards, enthusiasm, a caring attitude and a love for learning, knowledge of discipline and classroom management techniques and a desire to make a difference in the lives of learners. According to Rosenthal (2006), great teachers should:

- Set high expectations for all students
- Have clear, written-out objectives
- Be prepared and organized
- Engage students and get them to look at issues in a variety of ways
- Form strong relationships with their students and show that they care about them as people
- Be masters of their subject matter
- Give constant praise

Educators' teaching makes an impact on students' achievement with their art and science since they are the ones who inspire and engage students in the university life and its rewards. The known educator Freire (2005, p. 5) points out,

“It is a task that requires that those who commit themselves to teaching develop a certain love not only of others but also of the very process implied in teaching. It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try thousand times before giving up.”

Likewise, another factor that helps students in their pursuit for accomplishment is university services that go from freshman seminars to university life, financial aid, health services, psychology treatments, career orientation, student

organizations, use of resources and cultural and recreational activities, among others. These help students find the path to their future journey knowledgeably.

UNA has a program called *Programa Éxito Académico*, directed by Vicerrectoría Académica, which objective is to offer academic and personal support to the students through strategies that strengthen the integral development and competencies to ensure permanency and academic success. Students are offered tutorials in Mathematics, English and other subjects, writing workshops, study habit workshops, freshman orientation and leisure activities, among others.

## **II. Clear Pathways to Student Academic Success**

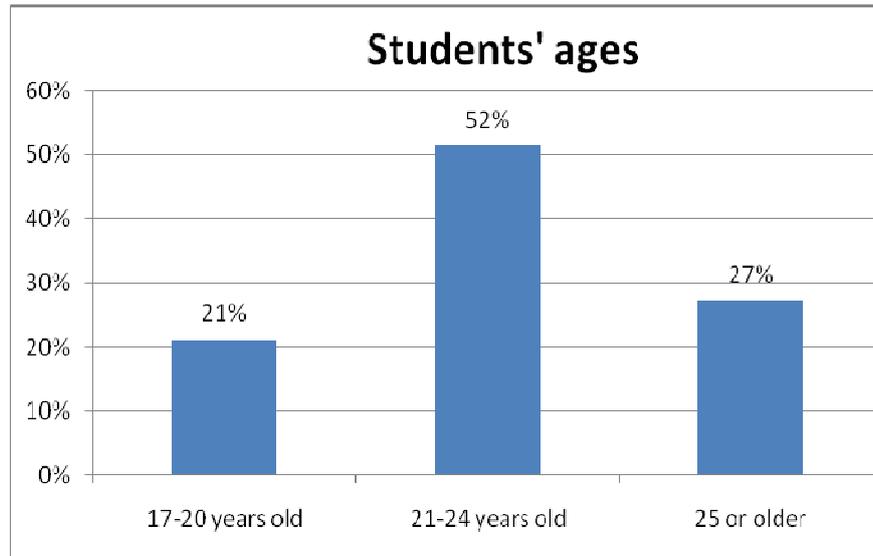
Research demonstrates that students attribute academic success to study habits like reading skills, examination techniques, time, note-taking skills, organization of work and revision, lecture-content, interest, motivation, ability, peers and financial security, among others (Fontana and Williams, 1996). Also traits such as self-motivation, self-management, self-responsibility, self-awareness, interdependence, long-life learning and self-esteem are paramount to attain outstanding achievement in higher-level academic settings (Downing, 2000).

Moreover, according to Kuh et al (2009), academic challenge, active and collaborative learning, student-faculty interaction, enriching educational experiences, and supportive campus environments constitute the five clusters of effective educational practices. This academic setting supports students in

their endeavors, enhance their motivation and build a positive attitude towards satisfaction and commitment to their studies. Also, Frost (1991) claims that research on college students proposes that activities like advising could increase students' involvement in their college experiences. She recommends universities to use strategic planning to design advising programs based on relationships of shared responsibility and focused on students' success. Perceptive advisers share responsibility for counseling with students about educational and career planning; also they inspire them to focus on exploring life, career and educational goals. Success in any field creates a positive feedback loop that increases motivation and performance, which encourages more success.

### **The Case Study**

Valuable information about the factors influencing academic success in students at the BEI program was gathered through a survey conducted during the month of November, 2009. The sample includes the opinion of 33 learners, 19 students from the third year and 14 from the fourth year. From the total, 20 are female and 13 male, and the age range of the majority of them is from 21 to 24 years old. A 58% of the students are from the city and a 70% currently live in Heredia.

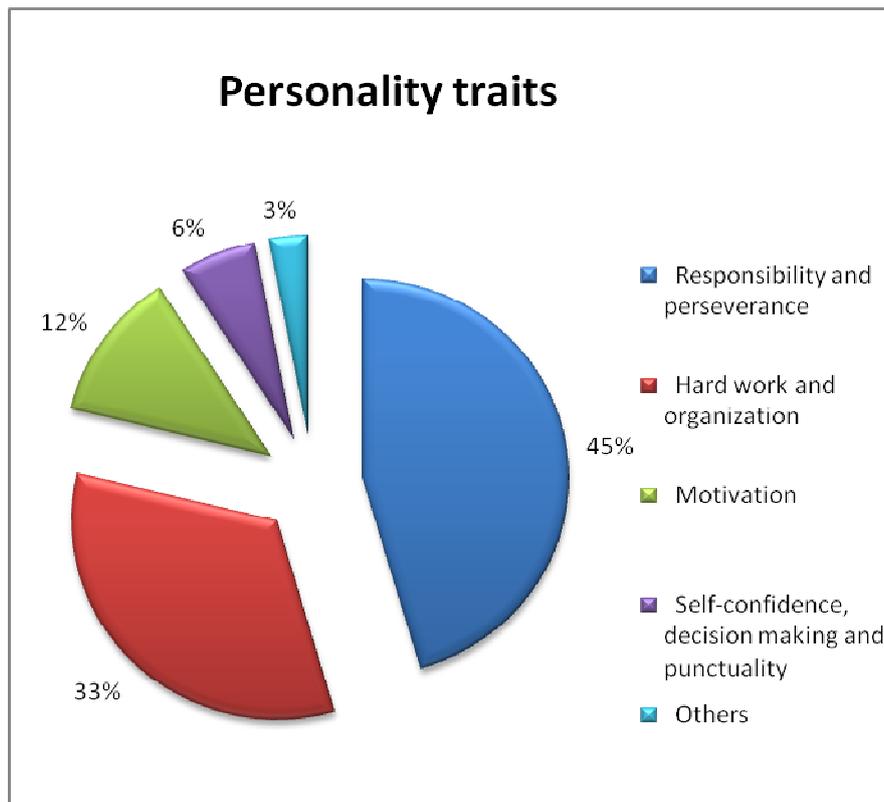


Graph 1: Students' ages

The questionnaire included the following criteria:

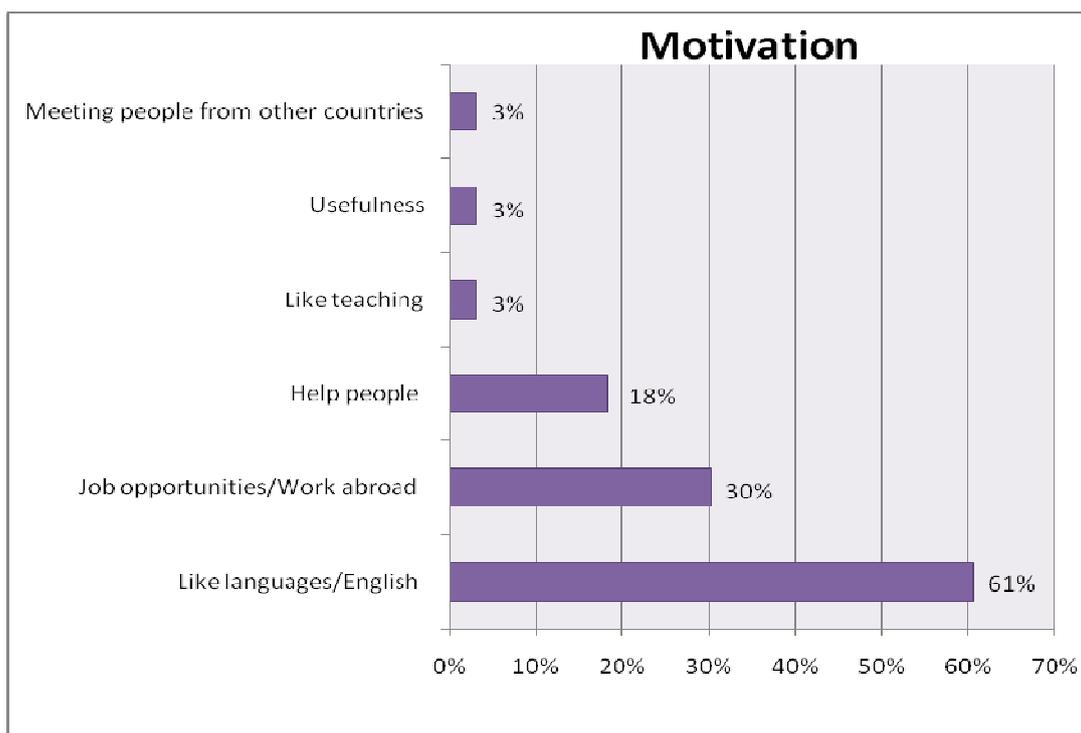
- 1) Personal factors (8 questions)
- 2) University context (3 questions)
- 3) Professors' role (5 questions)

Regarding the first criterion, the personality traits that students consider the most important to succeed in their studies are responsibility and perseverance, with a 45%. Hard work and organization represent a 33%, motivation a 12% and others like self-confidence, decision making and punctuality a 6%. In terms of the study habits learners have, reviewing material before and after class, reading, taking notes and doing homework are the ones considered the most important. Students' learning preferences include interacting with others, reading, using visual aids, learning about new topics and listening.



Graph 2: Personality traits

According to Norris-Halt, motivation is divided into two basic types: integrative and instrumental. Integrative motivation is characterized by the learner's positive attitudes towards the target language group and the desire to integrate into the target language community. Instrumental motivation underlies the goal to gain some social or economic reward through L2 achievement, thus referring to a more functional reason for language learning. This can be shown in the students' answers in relation to their motivation to study English teaching. Learners expressed as the first aspect their interest for languages, especially English, which corresponded to a 61%. The need to have job opportunities, including working abroad, represented a 30%, and the possibility to help people, an 18%.



Graph 3: Motivation

This motivation in students is demonstrated in their satisfaction with the major, since 88% of them expressed they like English teaching. In fact, pursuing a university degree is important for them because by receiving superior education they ensure a better lifestyle and future, as they grow personally and professionally. In order to achieve this, a constant improvement is necessary; students expressed that dedicating more time to their major (37%), becoming better at their own learning and language skills (26%), and showing more interest towards their studies (19%) would definitely influence positively in their way to academic success. Among the learners' short-term personal goals are graduating from their English Teaching major, doing graduate studies and being given different job opportunities.



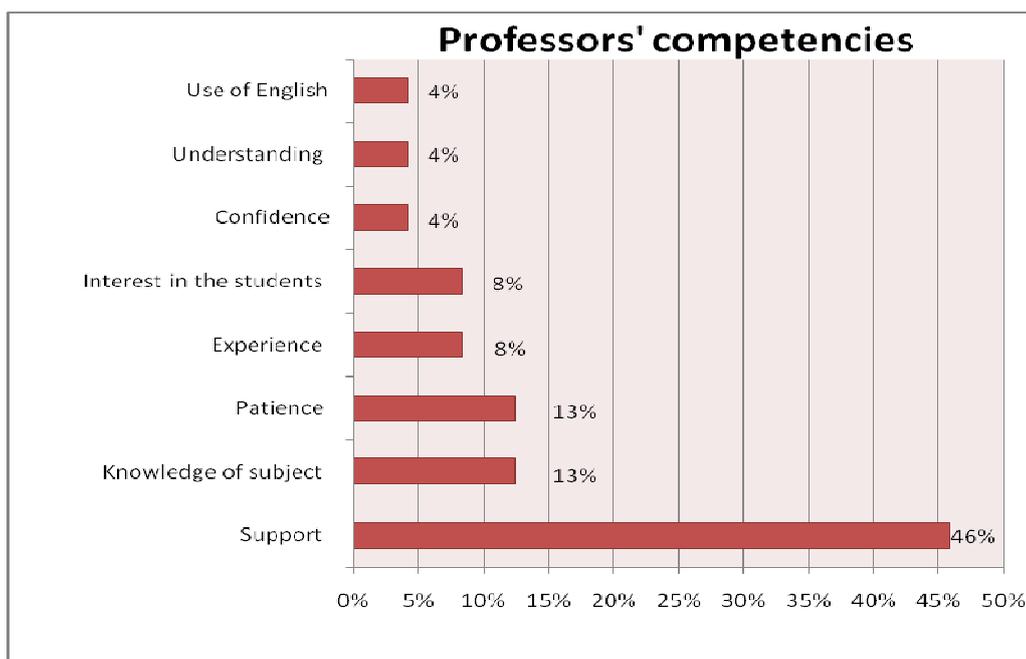
Graph 4: Reasons for pursuing a university degree

About the university context, students indicated that UNA has helped them reach their academic goals by offering excellent professors, financial aid, facilities, good learning experiences and a good variety of courses, including extra-curricular ones. Some aspects the university offers learners to help them in their students are the two libraries, one of which specializes in the teaching of languages, the language and multimedia labs, technology and free access to Internet, recreational services like cultural and sports events and accommodation for people with special needs throughout the campus.

“Teachers who displayed more friendly and understanding behavior in their interactions in the classroom tended to enhance not only learner achievement but also their attitudes towards the subject matter (cited in Williams and Burden: *ibid.*)” (Ghanizadeh and Moafian, 2009).

The professors’ personality is, indeed, a key factor in order to assure success in students. Regarding the qualities professors should have in order to help learners in their academic goals, the students expressed that competencies like

support (with a 46%), knowledge of subject (26%), patience (24%), experience (16%), understanding (13%) and willingness to help (8%) were the most important ones. In terms of successful teaching strategies, interactive activities and clear and organized explanations were the ones mentioned the most by all students.



Graph 5: Professors' competencies

## Conclusion

This case study concludes that BEI students at ELCL are involved in a university life with outstanding inherent factors for academic success. UNA goals are met in the sense of offering students the necessary context, facilities and a good quality of education so that learners become great professionals. UNA students, specifically the ones at the BEI program, are aware of what it is required to succeed academically in different aspects such as their personality traits, university context and professors' role. The results of their effort and enthusiasm will be shown in their future work as excellent professors of English in various institutions of our country, or even abroad.

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