

# Motivation, Quality University and Counseling Services at the University of Granada

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## Abstract

**Introduction.** Evaluative data on performance and school drop-out in the context of the Spanish university justify its current phase of structural, organizational and curricular changes currently underway here. A priority objective is to study motivation problems in university students, at the root of many of these problems. However, the complexity of the phenomenon, together with limitations of the available psychological models, underscore the need for more research, particularly applied to this area.

**Method.** Students who make up our sample turn to the Counseling Center (CC) at their own initiative. In order for us to evaluate and respond to their demands, they complete a school psychology information protocol where we collect demographic, psychological, academic and vocational-professional data, to be presented in this study.

**Results.** Results show percentages and proportions of students with motivation problems that underlie the help-seeking behavior of counseling services. Other results complete and corroborate the potential of some current models for improving the strength and usefulness of future interventions.

**Discussion.** The volatility of the human motivation phenomenon is perhaps due to limitations of available theoretical models to date. Thus we may need to continue measuring and collecting data in the cognitive and affective realm as codeterminants of motivational level in students. Data presented in this study allow us to validate the usefulness of one model analyzed, and to recommend its potential for future intervention designs.

*Keywords:* motivation, academic performance, university drop-out, attrition, learned helplessness, learned helplessness, classmates, school experiences, negative feedback from teachers

## Introducción

The European Space for Higher Education (Bologna Declaration), reform of teacher access to the public university teaching function (e.g. "LOU", Organic Law of Universities), and changes to the university access system for upper secondary students are three clear examples that are changing the profile of Spanish universities. The university's poor results in its three basic functions of training, research and social change have played their part in eliciting these changes (Arco-Tirado & Fernández-Balboa, 2003). Regarding these, Bricall (2000) points out the scarcity of data from analytical research which support and justify the changes proposed and adopted at university level. Moreover, Vidal, Díez and Vieira (2001) call attention to the fact that neither of the two university legislative reforms put forward in the last twenty years ("LRU", University Reform Law<sup>1</sup>, 1983; LOU<sup>2</sup>, 2001) include any analysis or forethought as to creating and developing services that address students' psychological needs, needs which lead to maladjustment to the demands of university life.

In the midst of all these complex processes of transformation and change we find the student body, greatly impacted by the situation just described, as shown by recent available evaluative data, where 37% of students in five-year programs complete their program successfully, 31% fall behind and 32% drop out, while in three-year programs 53.5%, 25% and 22% are the respective equivalents (Consejo de Universidades, 1997). This low academic performance increases the actual time students spend at university, adding an extra 50% to the average theoretical length of degree programs, with 50% of students completing their studies (Consejo de Universidades, 1997). The report carried out by García-Varcarcel, Salvador and Zubieta (1991) indicates that 65% of drop-outs occur in the first year, and that in technical degree programs, as many as 30% of students repeat their first year, while the percentage of students who sit for exams is less than 30%. This high level of academic failure, besides resulting in high social and economic cost as well as high levels of frustration for many young people, at the same time significantly influences teaching quality by increasing overcrowding (Valle, 1997). Moreover, the Europa Press agency (2001) indicates that nearly four of every ten university students suffer depression, although only 8 in a 100 suffer frequently.

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<sup>1</sup> LRU: legislative act for refining the changes undergone by the Spanish university system in the last 25 years; it deals with internal aspects of the university (e.g. improving the quality of teaching, research and administration, encouraging mobility of students and teachers, etc.)

<sup>2</sup> LOU: Law directed from Society to the University, where both are to have suitable mechanisms for strengthening collaboration which is both necessary and fruitful. It constitutes the proper framework for balancing university autonomy with accountability to the society that both stimulates and finances it

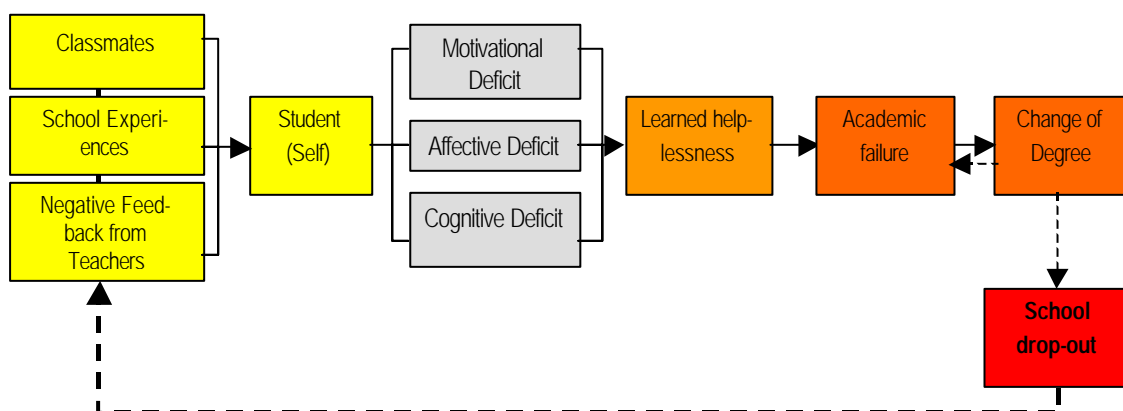
From a theoretical point of view, motivation is one of the critical components of learning, and at the same time, one of the most difficult to measure. The desire to learn something is the product of many factors such as student's previous history (personality) and skills, task characteristics, incentives for learning, institutional context and teacher behavior, among others. If the starting point is that all students are motivated, the question would be *to do what?* Scientific publications indicate that the role of the educator is not to increase motivation *per se*, but to discover, encourage and sustain the student's motivation to learn and to get involved in activities that lead to learning. Nonetheless, what is the role of the institution where these educational interaction processes between teacher and student take place? Should it create favorable conditions so that teachers fulfill their assigned role? The alarming levels of academic failure and drop out, cited above, can only be understood by recognizing a generalized flaw in the organization, planning and implementation of the university's fundamental training, research and social functions.

Defining motivation as an internal state that provokes, directs and maintains behavior over time (Baron, 1998; Schunk, 1991) is just the beginning, since from an applied point of view, the immediate question we must answer is how to generate and/or maintain these internal states. We know that the answer depends on the theoretical approach which we adopt. If we understand motivation as a consequence of reinforcement or a history of reinforcement, we will be using *behavioral models* (Chance, 1992; Strong, Silver & Robinson, 1995). However, if we consider motivation to be the manifestation of a series of innate basic needs, our reference will be *humanistic models* of motivation (Maslow, 1968). On the other hand, if we think of motivation as the generalized tendency to struggle for and seek success and to choose goal- and success-oriented activities, and when one fails, to redouble efforts until one succeeds, then we are looking at a cognitive approach, or one of *Achievement Motivation* (McClelland & Atkinson, 1948). Among cognitive models we can also highlight Weiner's approach (1992) and his model based on *Attributions* of success or failure (Locus of Control, Stability, Responsibility). Or perhaps the *Expectations* model, which holds that a person's motivation to attain something depends on the product of that person's estimation of likely success and the value that that person assigns to their success (Edwards, 1954; Atkinson, 1964).

Notwithstanding, research shows that the apparent abundance of models is actually hiding our weakness in isolating and controlling problems of circularity and directionality among variables. For example, some studies show that achievement motivation tends to diminish over the length of one's schooling, but it is not clear whether this is due to the nature of the phenomenon or rather to characteristics of lower and upper secondary school (Eccles et al., 1993; Maehr & Anderman, 1993). On the other hand, we know that with equal levels of intelligence, those who present an internal locus of control get better grades (Schunk, 1991; Shell, Colvin, & Bruning, 1995), even though locus of control can change and it depends on the activity or situation in question, and that locus of control influences performance and that performance has a strong impact on locus of control (Weiner, 1992).

Another highly interesting contribution in the field of motivation comes from Seligman (1975) and his concept of *learned helplessness (helplessness)* that gives rise to motivational, cognitive and affective deficits. It consists of perceiving that it doesn't matter what one does, since he or she is already condemned to fail (Maier, Seligman & Solomon, 1969). Learned helplessness (helplessness) can appear because of childraising practices (Hokoda & Fincham, 1995), but also through the use of unpredictable and inconsistent forms of reinforcement and punishment on the part of teachers. Applied to our case, students would fail academically through a process of conditioning based on negative feedback from teachers, school experiences, classmates and the students themselves. Numerous studies show that when students consistently fail, in the end they will drop out (Seligman, 1975).

**Figure 1: Adaptation of Learned Helplessness from Hokoda and Fincham (1995)**



Thus far we have reviewed the current situation of the Spanish university in terms of basic indicators of educational quality, and the theoretical models of motivation which are

available for evaluating and understanding more fully what, how and why this situation is being produced. We now turn to validating one proposed model, in order to explain relationships between variables that influence motivation and different adjustment problems to the demands of university life.

## **Method**

### ***Subjects***

Our sample is composed of a total of 85 students from the University of Granada, all of them users of the Counseling Center (CC), from January 2002 to January 2003. The average age is 23.26 years, with an interval from 18 to 32 years. As for gender, 47.06% are women and 52.94% are men. 98.82% of users are single, and 1.18% married. They come from 20 university schools and departments and 37 degree programs, ranging from students in first year undergraduate to doctoral students.

### ***Procedure***

Students come to the Counseling Center in search of personal counsel. After listening to their request, we ask them to complete (if necessary) a consent protocol, as well as another protocol where they indicate the presence or absence of certain problems, difficulties or worries, those being of an academic, psychological, interpersonal or vocational-professional nature. The 85 students completed the School Psychology Information Protocol (PIP), being advised at all times by a school professional who was available to answer any doubts or problems that came up regarding the subject's acceptance of consent protocol conditions, or regarding completion of the PIP. All the information is tabulated and recorded below in a database designed *ad hoc* for the center.

### ***Instruments***

*The School Psychology Information Protocol (PIP).* This 80-item inventory collects information about the worries or problems that have led them to turn to the center for personal counsel. Items are grouped into different areas: demographic, academic, psychological, interpersonal and vocational-professional. The inventory also includes some open questions where students are to describe what their problem consists of, what they hope to obtain from

the center, and the degree of effort and commitment they are willing to put forward. The inventory was constructed over a two-year period, when students' preoccupations were identified and analyzed in combination with other protocols taken and adapted from other universities. Therefore, validity of the instrument's content rests on the development and revision of a list of concerns revealed by the students. A similar method was used by Lubowitz (1989, cited in Nicholas, 1997) and Gallagher, Golin and Kelleher (1992), who construct their *Survey of Student Needs* based on concerns and problems that students revealed when requesting counseling services over a period of ten years.

*Database in MS Access.* All records from the PIP are tabulated in this database constructed *ad hoc* for this center.

### **Statistic analysis**

The SPSS statistical package (v.11) was used to perform calculations of descriptive and inferential statistics included in this study.

### **Results**

Results in Table 1 show that of the 85 subjects making up the target population, 52.94% are women and 47.06% are men, with an average age of 23.26 years and an age range of 18-32 years. As for marital status, 98.82% are single and 1.18% married, and regarding nationality, 8.24% are foreigners (1.18 from the E.U. and 7.06 outside the E.U.). Regarding degree programs and year of studies, a majority are doing programs in Social and Legal Sciences and in Technology (30.59% and 27.06%, respectively) and they are enrolled in their Fourth (18.82%) or Third (15.29%) year of studies. Finally, we note that 52.94% show an academic lag (that is, they are making up subjects from different academic years at the same time), 23.53% have changed their degree program, and 17.65% have previously dropped out.

**Table 1. Sample description**

| SAMPLE CHARACTERISTICS |         | N     | %     |
|------------------------|---------|-------|-------|
| Sex                    | Female  | 40    | 47.06 |
|                        | Male    | 45    | 52.94 |
| Age                    | Average | 23.26 |       |
|                        | Range   | 18-32 |       |

|                                 |  |           |               |
|---------------------------------|--|-----------|---------------|
| <b>Marital Status</b>           | Single                                   | 84        | 98.82         |
|                                 | Married                                  | 1         | 1.18          |
| <b>Nationality</b>              | Spanish                                  | 78        | 91.76         |
|                                 | European Union                           | 1         | 1.18          |
|                                 | Outside European Union                   | 6         | 7.06          |
| <b>Degree program</b>           | Social and Legal Sciences                | 26        | 30.59         |
|                                 | Humanities                               | 19        | 22.35         |
|                                 | Experimental and Technological Sciences  | 23        | 27.06         |
|                                 | Health Sciences                          | 11        | 12.94         |
|                                 | Doctorate                                | 4         | 4.71          |
|                                 | Other                                    | 2         | 2.35          |
|                                 |  |           |               |
| <b>Year in School</b>           | First                                    | 10        | 11.76         |
|                                 | Second                                   | 11        | 12.94         |
|                                 | Third                                    | 13        | 15.29         |
|                                 | Fourth                                   | 16        | 18.82         |
|                                 | Fifth                                    | 3         | 3.53          |
|                                 | Sixth                                    | 1         | 1.18          |
|                                 | Making up courses (multiple schoolyears) | 21        | 24.71         |
|                                 | Completed                                | 4         | 4.71          |
|                                 | Doctorate                                | 4         | 4.71          |
|                                 | Others                                   | 2         | 2.35          |
|                                 |  |           |               |
| <b>Academic Lag</b>             |  | 45        | 52.94         |
| <b>Change in Degree Program</b> |  | 20        | 23.53         |
| <b>Drop-out</b>                 |  | 15        | 17.65         |
| <b>Total</b>                    |  | <b>85</b> | <b>100.00</b> |

Results from inferential statistical analyses, where possible, are shown in Table 2. We can observe statistical significance in the variables "Degree" being pursued and "Academic Year" in which they are enrolled.

**Table 2. Chi-Square Test results**

| COMPARISON STATISTICS  |       |                |             |            |       |
|------------------------|-------|----------------|-------------|------------|-------|
|                        | Sex   | Degree Program | Nationality | Schoolyear | Lag   |
| <b>Chi-square</b>      | 2.821 | 13.354         | 2.050       | 30.885     | 2.593 |
| <b>gl</b>              | 1     | 3              | 2           | 9          | 1     |
| <b>Asymptotic Sig.</b> | .093  | .004*          | .359        | .000*      | .107  |

\* =  $p < .05$ . The zero has been eliminated for better clarity of presentation.

A qualitative analysis of answers given by subjects when asked what they hoped to obtain from the center, and what we might consider as examples of cognitive-affective, academic and social variables which co-determine motivation in the subjects, allow us to group their answers in the following categories. In the area of *self-control deficits*, (including aims such as "Stop feeling bad sometimes", "be able to change my way of thinking", "Balance my



moods”, “Stop being anxious and having a hard time”, “I want to not be affected by interpersonal relationships”, etc.) we find 71.76%; in the category *self-esteem deficit* (including answers such as “Increase my self-esteem”, “To be more comfortable with myself”, “More security”, “Learn to face life more optimistically”, “Recover my self-confidence”, etc.) we find 29.41%; in the category *academic deficit* (which includes aims such as “Successfully finish my degree program”, “Improve my academic performance”, “Do well on exams, meet my goals”, “Finish my last schoolyear”, etc.) we find a percentage of 38.82; finally, in the category *social relations deficit* (including “Improve my personal situation with others”, “Be able to relate to others without problems”, “Improve my social skills and relationships”, etc.) percentages are 16.47%. When the subjects themselves evaluate the reason behind their difficulties, 56.47% say they “lack motivation in studies”, 37.65% state that they “lack motivation to continue with the degree program”, and 10.59% affirm that they are “thinking of changing degree program”.

Results as to how one learned of the counseling service are distributed as follows: Referred by friends and through the web site, 25.88% of users, each; users referred from other university services constitute 9.41%, the same percentage applies family referrals and to university publications; 7% are referred by teachers, and remaining categories show percentages as seen in table 3.

**Table 3. Referral to the Counseling Service.**

| Means of Referral         | N         | %          |
|---------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Friends                   | 22        | 25.88      |
| Other university services | 8         | 9.41       |
| Residence hall            | 2         | 2.35       |
| Family members            | 8         | 9.41       |
| Website                   | 22        | 25.88      |
| Teachers                  | 6         | 7.06       |
| University publications   | 8         | 9.41       |
| Brochures                 | 4         | 4.71       |
| Counseling Center poster  | 1         | 1.18       |
| Other                     | 4         | 4.71       |
| <b>Total</b>              | <b>85</b> | <b>100</b> |

Regarding other indicators directly related to motivation in students who come for counseling services, the average value for effort they are willing to put forward is 9.45 (out of 10). Classified according to school year, this same indicator breaks down as follows: 9.10 for

first year, 9.68 for second year, 9.64 for third year, 9.53 for fourth year, 10 for fifth year, 8.4 for postgraduates; 9.53 for those enrolled in subjects from different academic years; and 9 for doctoral students. By degree program, in accordance with Table 4, we find the average for motivation is distributed as follows: 9.41 for Humanities; 9.80 for Experimental and Technological Sciences; 9.21 for Social and Legal Sciences; and 9.50 for Health Sciences.

**Table 4. Level of commitment by schoolyear and degree program.**

| LEVEL OF COMMITMENT/EFFORT |      |   |      |
|----------------------------|------|---|------|
| Total: 9.45                |      |   |      |
| SCHOOLYEAR                 |      | DEGREE PROGRAM                          |      |
| 1                          | 9.10 | Humanities                              | 9.41 |
| 2                          | 9.68 |   |      |
| 3                          | 9.64 |   |      |
| 4                          | 9.53 | Experimental and Technological Sciences | 9.80 |
| 5                          | 10   |   |      |
| 6                          | -    | Social and Legal Sciences               | 9.21 |
| Graduates                  | 8.4  |   |      |
| Multiple schoolyears       | 9.53 | Health Sciences                         | 9.50 |
| Doctorate                  | 9    |   |      |

Finally, if we look at data on service indicators at the Counseling Center, we obtain of a total of 247 sessions delivered, with an average of 2.906 sessions per client, 8.18% cancellations (notified absences) and 9.19% no-shows (not notified). In Table 5 other indicators appear from users' evaluation of the service, as well as their assessment regarding the level of distress change that was achieved over the length of the intervention process.

**Table 5. Counseling Service evaluation results**

| RESULTS OF COUNSELING CENTER SERVICE EVALUATION |             |      |
|---|-------------|------|
| Areas Evaluated                                 | Average (*) | DS   |
| Quality of Service                              | 4.22        | 0.95 |
| Quality of Professional Staff                   | 4.73        | 0.51 |
| Personal Change                                 | 4.20        | 0.83 |
| Initial Distress                                | 4.43        | 0.51 |
| Final Distress                                  | 1.86        | 0.53 |

(\*) Out of a possible 5.

## Discussion

We must keep in mind that when a student turns to our service, he or she generally does so after having thought about it for quite some time. Reasons may have to do with the nature of what we do in itself, and also with the social stigma that even today is associated with seeing a psychologist. Even so the number of requests is continually rising, and among factors which facilitate this change in response is being able to go to a place that offers psychological and/or school-related counseling under certain conditions of confidentiality.

It is often said that there is nothing more practical than a good theory, and our discussion will revolve around this idea. In order to verify the goodness of the theoretical model adapted here from work by Hokoda and Fincham (1995), we begin reading the process from right to left, though in fact the arrows, which indicate fluctuation of functional relationships between selected variables, clearly show the circularity of the process (see Figure 1). Out of 85 subjects making up this sample, we find that 17.6% show earlier attempts to drop out of school, whether it be at the university itself, or at lower educational levels. 23.5% of subjects are about to change degree program, and, at an earlier stage, we find as many as 53% of subjects showing a kind of academic failure which we have called "academic lag". This consists of enrolling in subjects from different academic years at the same time (make-up courses); for most subjects this leads to problems of credit overload, unworkable schedules, overlapping periods of practical work experience, etc., multiplying from one schoolyear to the next. Although non-parametric contrasts performed (Chi-square test) do not show significant statistical differences in this variable, students in this condition who received Counseling services constitute the majority group, see Table 1.

Regarding characteristics shown in our subjects' lack of motivation problem, nearly 72% of subjects attribute their difficulties to lack of self-control, and almost 30% attribute it to a lack of self-esteem. The importance of these data lies in the fact that, as our model would predict, subjects present not only a deficit in motivation, but also deficits in other basic behavioral areas such as cognitions which they generate and maintain in order to explain their situation, and value judgments that they add to these cognitions with regard to their capacity or lack thereof for successfully facing demands made by the academic situation. This explanation is additionally of interest in that it approaches that of other authors as relevant as Bandura (1986), who proposed his concept of Self-efficacy as the factor (with a causal function) that

precedes behavior and explains it as cognitions or verbalizations which the subject tells himself regarding his capacity to perform a certain behavior. This approach to the phenomenon is quite interesting since it fits in with more recent formulations of self-regulated learning and its power and usefulness for addressing this kind of educational challenge. Another substantial percentage, nearly 40%, claim the deficits are also academic ones, in that they consider the academic situation to be the source of their problems. Finally, for about 17%, relations with others constitutes another factor that creates imbalance in their lives. The above percentages total more than one hundred, since as the reader would suppose, many subjects indicate several of these deficit circumstances as co-existing barriers to reaching their objectives. Motivational deficits indicated by the model are confirmed when 56.47% of subjects "think I lack motivation in my studies", 37.65% affirm "I lack motivation to continue my degree program", and 10.59% state that "I am thinking of changing degree program". This is especially troubling in light of the fact that several of them have already used this "wild card" before. In this point it becomes difficult to maintain some authors' initial assumption that the motivation problem is more in maintaining it and orienting it than in generating it.

When we look at the individuals' level of commitment manifest when beginning to receive the counseling center's attention (be it personal, academic, vocational/professional), we find very high levels for all schoolyears, with a maximum for fifth-year students, about to finish their studies, and a minimum for first-year students. These data could be expected given their respective academic situations. When data are analyzed by schoolyear, we find statistically significant differences, leading us to affirm that the proportion of students in different schoolyears which are attended in our center is different from what could be expected as a function of the total number of students enrolled (by schoolyear) in the University. The same occurs when comparing subjects according to their branch of study or degree program, where we find significant differences. In other words, the number of students from the different branches or degree programs who seek counseling services (psychological, academic, vocational) at the Counseling Center, is different from what one would expect as a function of the total number of students enrolled in the given branches or degree programs. This can be interpreted to mean that students with academic and motivational needs do not distribute themselves evenly among the degree programs, or, that the circumstances generating deficits or difficulties in adaptation are not evenly distributed among the different degree programs of the university.

Additional available data regarding variables that appear more to the left of the model are especially significant. For many subjects they represent the possibility of breaking the circularity of the problem that we noticed in the beginning. In fact, what we know about effectiveness of interventions, whether medical, social or psychological, recommends intervening in the earliest possible phase, since probabilities of success are directly proportional to the point in time when intervention takes place, that is, greater success earlier on. Thus the values of variables more to the left of the model are especially important. In this sense, for a teacher to take interest in a student's academic situation and refer him or her to the appropriate services (for example the university Counseling Center), instead of just giving him or her negative feedback, means inhibiting or inverting this factor's negative influence in the student's de-motivation process. Moreover, it means the teacher is taking interest in suitably fulfilling her advisory function at the university and/or that she is actively attentive to her professional environment, since she knows this service exists. In effect, this is the case for some 7% of students received in our Center, since they were referred by teachers. Regarding the second set of factors under prior school experiences, using the same line of argument as in the previous variable (teachers), we find that that nearly 10% of users were referred by other university services, and a similar percentage were advised by a family member. As for the variable friends, the model seems correct again, since nearly 26% of users learned of the service from classmates and friends, confirming the importance of the social support network when it comes to predicting adjustment to a new life, or at least one's chances of knowing about and having access to services needed. New data, however, reveal another important and novel aspect, from the point of view of knowing about and having access to the service (as an alternative or complementary avenue to the social network); this is the Web site, which likewise referred another 26% of users.

Finally, we wish to reflect on some available data from users' evaluations of the service received, since we understand that they have a significant effect precisely on students' levels of motivation in facing academic difficulties and, by extension, personal difficulties. According to our data, initial levels of distress compared to those at the end of the intervention show a considerable drop (4.43 compared to 1.86, on a scale of five). Thus we help reduce probabilities of failure and drop-out by improving levels of self-control and subsequently of self-esteem, both being available to subjects for facing the varying demands, not only academic, of their environment. Other indirect reliability and validity indicators of the data on distress level, for example, are the low rate of cancellations (8.18%) and no-shows

(9.19%) at the center, which likewise reflects how students can make responsible use of services when these are really adapted to their needs.

## Conclusions

At this moment, our possibilities as scientists and educators to fully control the motivation phenomenon and its effects in learning and development processes are subject to the diversity of available models and the interdependency of the different variables identified. That is, we face an extraordinarily complex phenomenon and a process that feeds on itself.

In order to solve the problem of learned hopelessness we must work from different angles. From the institutional level, (a) developing programs that help teachers to review their presentation methods, for example giving more immediate feedback, or maintaining positive and consistent expectations towards their students, (b) also improving materials in use, such that they increase and maintain the students' interest and curiosity, and furthermore, (c) increase and improve advisory and orientation services offered within the universities themselves, as is the case with the Counseling Center at the University of Granada ([www.ugr.es/local/ve/gpp.html](http://www.ugr.es/local/ve/gpp.html)). From the curriculum level, by means of programs that teach students to establish their own learning objectives, by training them in attribution and restructuring of objectives, in giving feedback to themselves, and in rewarding and punishing themselves to an appropriate extent and in appropriate conditions.

But all this must be done before they enroll in the university, both in Secondary Education and, especially, in Primary Education. since, following the prevention/early intervention principle, that is when the most success can be achieved.

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