Academic Goal Pursuit: The Influence of Long Term versus Short Term Goals

Abigail Abt
Caitlyn Conrad
Jillian Dodson
Danica Dy
Raiba Soada

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

(Introduction section drafted by Caitlyn Conrad; Methods section drafted by Raiba Soada; Results section drafted by Jillian Dodson and Danica Dy; Discussion section drafted by Abigail Abt)

Abstract:

The present study focused on the impacts of long term versus short term goals on a person's goal pursuit. We used academic goals throughout the entire research to maintain control, so that no person's commitment to the goal would differ based solely on the type of goal. Our dependent variable was how committed a person was to accomplishing their goal. Our independent variable was the length of time between now and when the goal is perceived to be achieved, long term or short term. Such as making a good grade on a certain assignment versus making a good grade in the entire class. Our hypothesis stated that on average people would show more commitment and pursuit towards short term goals as opposed to long term goals. Our experiment provided no reliable results due to the failure of our manipulation check, the participants did not perceive the differences between the set short or long term goals. Therefore, it is to be concluded we cannot determine a reasonable difference between motivation or goals, and neither is more reliable, with the current research.

Introduction:

Dependent Variable: Academic Goals

Goals and goal setting is necessary for individuals to ensure high performance in every aspect in which they are involved. It is important to consider that the different aspects of goal setting play an essential role of how our goals will play out and contribute to our accomplishments. Whether the goals one sets is vague, moderately difficult, virtually impossible or too reachable, they are the starting points to where we will end up and what we'll accomplish in the future. The key to a successful goal pursuit is that the goal ought to be moderately

difficult and very specific. Even for a long term goal, it must be made up of short-term goals that would serve as ‘checkpoints’ along the way so small accomplishments stay within the near future to avoid discouragement. Not do small short-term goals allow the long-term goal to be accomplished, but the level of task complexity holds a lot of the responsibility. The goal's task complexity has a strong impact on the performance relationship (Wood, Mento and Locke, 2002). There is evidence that "the magnitude of goal to performance effects will decrease as the task complexity increased", so it is important that the goal is not necessarily complex to the point that it’s unattainable, but just difficult and specific enough for it to actually happen. The complexity and difficulty of the goal motivates the individual to grow through the duration of the accomplishment. Without a challenge, the individual seldom changes and the goal would therefore be meaningless. With that being said, a goal should not be unattainable to the point that the individual is discourage and it leads to more damage than success. There must be a balance based on the person’s opinion of goal importance and feasibility. In addition, the said goal must be specific so the individual can set a clear path toward accomplishing the goal. In conclusion there is evidence to support that the success of goals depends on the moderate difficulty and specificity of the goals themselves.

Independent Variable: Motivation in goals (Long-Term vs. Short-Term)

The factors that influence the outcome of goals, specifically academic goals is the notion of Long vs Short term goals. One aspect of life which people continually set goals is in academics. Attaining successful grades, getting into desired schools, earning degrees and getting the perfect post-graduate jobs are prime examples of both short and long term goal setting. Short

term and long term goals go hand and hand most of the time, not to say they are the same but short term goals are feeders for long term goals. Short term goals should be viewed as "checkpoints"; goals that are accomplished on the way to the ultimate long term goal. A stepping stone that leads to the long term goal. Long term goals don't just happen over a long period of time but they are conglomerations of various short term "checkpoint" goals. While accomplishing short term goals, individuals are given feelings of satisfaction, that their on the right track. This makes their ultimate long term goal more attainable as they are getting closer to their goals with the individual accomplishments of the short term goals. With the accomplishment of short term goals, people are accomplishing the long term goal all along.

In addition to the time span and structure of short versus long term goals, another factor in the success of a goal is motivation. With short term goals, individuals are much more motivated to complete and accomplish them since they're in hands reach. With long term goals, it's much more difficult for someone to see oneself accomplishing that goal, especially when it is a multi-faceted accomplishment. Long term goals generate hardly any motivation at all, but the existence of short term goals awaken motivation.

Hypothesis:

The concluding hypothesis is that people have more motivation for achieving short-term goals than long-term goals. Academic goals are greatly influenced by the motivation of the subject. In conclusion, multiple short term goals instead of a single long term goal would be the most effective way for an individual to accomplish their set goals.

Methods:

- **Participants:** The participant pool was a random sampling of UNC students over the age of 18. Through the random sampling, various races, ethnicities, and gender identities were represented in the pool. They were recruited by the researchers who conducted the study, who sent anonymous links to the surveys to multiple people in their social circles. One survey was for condition 1 (prompting the participant to set a distal goal) and the other was for condition 2 (prompting the participant to set a proximal goal). The surveys were randomly assigned to different participants.
- **Materials:**
    - **Independent variable:** The independent variable of this experience was the distance and specificity of the goal the participant was prompted to set. The participants who were put under condition 1 were prompted to set a general, distal goal, with the exact prompt "Set some academic goals for yourself that are specific and can be achieved within a short period of time, such as good grades on certain upcoming tests. (They should not be something that is general and distant, such as GPA.)" The participants who were put under condition 2 were prompted to set a specific, proximal goal, with the exact prompt "Set an academic goal for yourself at the end of the month of November. Let it be general enough to be something that you can work on throughout the remainder of October and November, such as a GPA or a letter average."
    - **Dependent variable:** The dependent variable is the motivation the participant had to achieve the goal, which went hand in hand with the confidence that the participant had in their ability to achieve it. This was self-reported by each participant. They

were prompted with the statements: “This goal is important to me,” “I am committed to this goal,” “I am willing to work to achieve this goal,” and “I believe this goal is attainable.” Participants were asked to rate how much they identified with each statement using a Likert scale that went from 1-7, with 1 being least and 7 being most.

- **Procedures:** Participants were presented with randomly assigned surveys by the researchers. Upon opening the survey, they were presented with a consent form outlining why the research was being done, what they’d be asked to do, how their confidentiality would be handled, what risks/benefits there were to participating, whether participating was obligatory, and who to contact for questions. When they clicked “I consent,” they were taken to page 2: “Thank you for agreeing to participate in our survey. Our experiment focuses on the setting and keeping of academic goals. Please answer each question truthfully.” Page 3 laid out a basic understanding of academic goal setting/motivation: “The setting and retention of goals affect the motivation and achievement of students. Because self-set goals are so important in academic success, it's important for students to be able to set goals in a way that they will be willing and able to attain them.” Page 4 was the only one that was different for the two different conditions that participants were presented with; this was where the independent variable, the distance and specificity of the goal, was measured. One group of participants was prompted with “Set an academic goal for yourself at the end of the month of November. Let it be general enough to be something that you can work on throughout the remainder of October and November, such as a GPA or a letter average.” The other group was

prompted with “Set some academic goals for yourself that are specific and can be achieved within a short period of time, such as good grades on certain upcoming tests. (They should not be something that is general and distant, such as GPA.)” Page 5 was used to measure the dependent variable, which was the motivation the participant had to achieve the goal. This was self-reported by each participant. Page 5 contained these four statements: “This goal is important to me,” “I am committed to this goal,” “I am willing to work to achieve this goal,” and “I believe this goal is attainable.” Participants were asked to rate how much they identified with each statement using a Likert scale that went from 1-7, with 1 being least and 7 being most. Then they were asked how many days between now and the end of November they would dedicate to achieving this goal. Page 6 asked “How much prior knowledge do you have of research in goal setting/goal motivation, if any?” Page 7 collected gender, age, and ethnicity information. Page 8 gave a description of how the study was conducted.

Results:

In this experiment, it was hypothesized that participants who had a specific and proximal goal would be more motivated and committed to achieving this goal as compared to participants who had a more distant and vague goal. In other words, the more proximal and specific the goal, the more committed the subject would be to attaining it. The independent variables were the proximity of goal; with regard to time and attainability, and the dependent variable of goal commitment was analyzed by ANOVA between subjects.

For this experiment, a total of 51 responses were collected, 27 of which were from the control survey and 24 of which were from the experimental survey. According to the Descriptive

Statistics table, the mean age of the sample demographic was 19.0714 with a standard deviation of 5.33919.

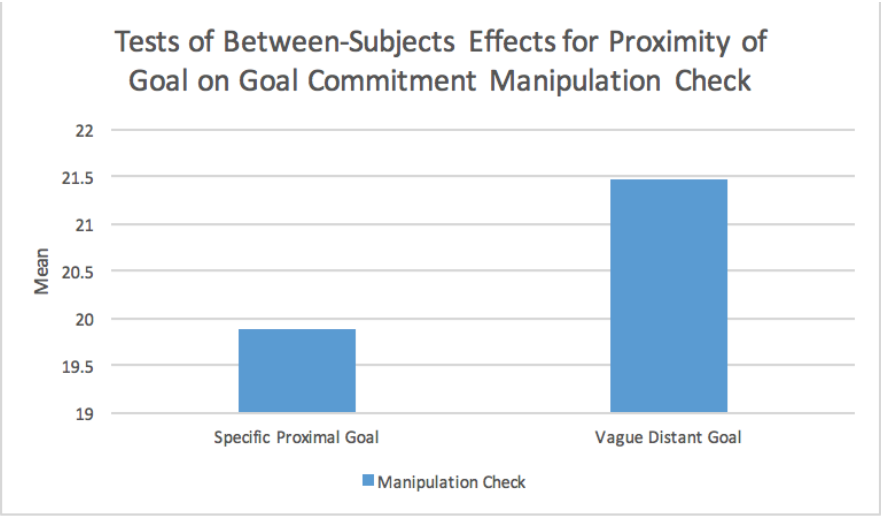
For the manipulation check results, it was found that the data was statistically insignificant, $F(1,31.297)=0.090$, $p>0.05$, partial eta squared = 0.002.

As presented in Figure 1 (below) the analysis for the manipulation check appears to state that the hypothesis was not supported by the data, such that the more distant and vague goal (M=21.4583, SD=15.84429) showed a greater association with goal commitment than the proximal specific goal (M=19.8889, SD=20.73335).

Table 1. *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Proximity of Goal on Goal Commitment Manipulation Check*

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F
Condition	31.297	1	31.297	0.090
Error	16950.63	49	345.931	

Figure 1. *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Proximity of Goal on Goal Commitment Manipulation Check*



For the manipulation check results, F(1,0.528)=0.481), p>0.05, partial eta squared = 0.009.

The data collected through this experiment showed that the manipulation check failed, therefore, it may not be concluded that goal commitment was influenced by whether or not the academic goal was proximal or distant with regard to time.

For the main dependent measure results, it was found that the data presented the opposite information of what appeared in the manipulation check data analysis; appearing to support the hypothesis: the more specific and proximal goal was associated with greater goal commitment (M=5.4483, SD=0.72389) as compared to the distant vague goal (M=5.2500,SD=1.32877).

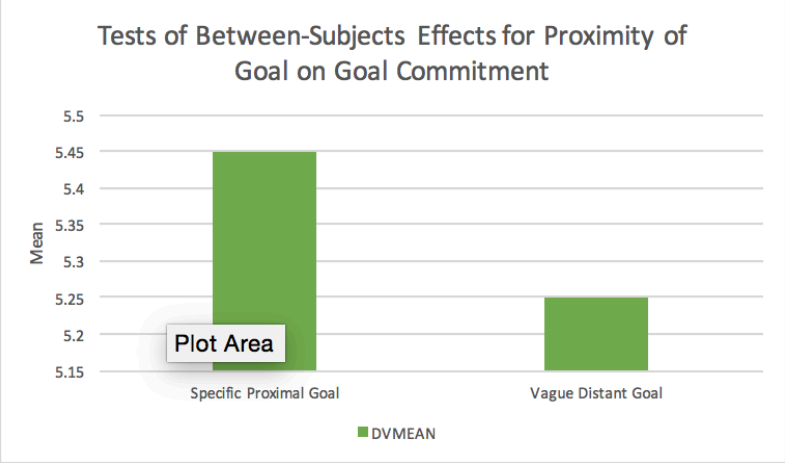
Table 2.

Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Proximity of Goal on Goal Commitment DVMEAN

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	DF	Mean Square	F
Condition	0.528	1	0.528	0.481

Error	57.047	52	1.097	

Figure 2. *Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Proximity of Goal on Goal Commitment DVMEAN*



Discussion:

The findings were not significant due to both the manipulation check failure as well as the data itself not representing a measurable significant difference between the control and experimental group. The hypothesis was neither correct nor incorrect with this specific study because our manipulation was not significant enough to provide a reliable result. The findings cannot be used as a reliable resource of information due to the failure of the manipulation check meaning that the participants didn't perceive the difference between the two distinct independent variables. If the results were to be significant they would've generalized about a person's commitment to a short term versus a long term academic goal. The manipulation check may have failed in this experiment, as setting an academic goal to achieve would be highly objective. The

result of academic performance was not specified to be an overall average or a specific assignment grade. Furthermore, academic motivation to strive for achievement and performance may be influenced by several uncontrolled variables such as unforeseen circumstances including mental health, academic health, social well-being and the subjectivity of grading. Furthermore, academic goals may often be similar between proximal and distant goals (ie: motivation to achieve an 85% or higher on an assignment due next week and the motivation to obtain an 85% or higher in a course would have equal desirability and therefore the response of commitment to achieving that goal would be comparably similar).

There are many reasons there may not have been a significant difference between long term and short term goal commitment. First, the experiment itself may not have made a clear enough difference between long term and short term academic goals. Second, there are many variables that we did not account for including mental health, grade level, current academic standing, etc. With reliable results, our findings could determine whether there exists an advantage in setting small short term goals or one long term goal, or if there is a difference at all. Our experiment did not sample enough people to provide very good information, also our design did not make our manipulation clear. If another group were to redo this project they could ask participants to choose a situation they would be most committed to so the subjects understand what they are being asked. For future experiments, to increase the likelihood of the significance of Munich to be statistically significant, an improvement may include the survey providing a specific non-academic goal and introducing the factor of comparing goal-achievement behaviours from previous instances. In future experiments, subjects may be asked about their motivation toward a goal including several different time periods with regard to

delayed-gratification. For example, “how committed to this goal are you?” followed by “if after a month of working toward this goal without knowing the outcome, how committed to this goal would you be?” and finally “in a previous instance similar to the assigned goal, how motivated were you to this goal? How motivated were you to this goal after a specified period of time (proximal/distant)”. Conversely, this experiment may be redesigned in the future to be conducted with several follow-up surveys over a period of time to determine if there are any active changes in motivation of goal-setting and achievement over time. Naturally, the subjects assigned to proximal goals would be surveyed for a shorter period of time than the subjects in the distant goals group. The best way to perform research that follows a person’s commitment to a goal is not to ask them to self-evaluate because that will cause bias in itself, but instead give them goals, either short or long term and observe each person’s advances towards accomplishing that goal. The project could use the advances towards the goal to determine each person’s commitment to the goal instead of just asking them for a hypothetical situation. This research study, due to its lack of statistical evidence does not build on or contradict any previous studies.

References:

Locke, E.A. and Latham, G.P. (2002) ‘Building a practically useful theory of goal setting and task motivation: A 35-year odyssey’, *American Psychologist*, 57(9), pp. 705–717. doi: 10.1037/0003-066x.57.9.705.