

## **POLITICAL SKILL AND SELF – EFFICACY AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The author examined the strength of relationships between measures of college students' (n = 168) general self-efficacy and four political skills (networking ability, interpersonal influence, social astuteness, and apparent sincerity). Significant Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were observed, as predicted, for the relations between general self-efficacy scale scores and each of the four scaled measures of political skill. The observed correlations, though not of causative value, per say, now may be of use in justifying future scholarly efforts focused on causal models involving these concepts and, furthermore, may support the implementation of practical strategies for building students' self-efficacy and promoting the development of students' political skill.

**Keywords:** political skill, general self-efficacy, college student.

## **INTRODUCTION:**

Is there a significant relationship between self-efficacy and political skill for college students? Bandura (1977; 1986) defined self-efficacy as a self-judgment of one's ability to perform a task. Ferris, Davidson, and Perrewé (2005) defined political skill as the ability to understand others at work and to use that knowledge to influence others to act in ways that enhance one's personal or organizational objectives. Ferris, et al. (2005), believe that as self-efficacy grows so too does an employee's capacity to develop political skill. At least in the workplace, then, a case has been made for hypothesizing the presence of a meaningful relationship between self-efficacy and political skill. Can the same be said for college students? An answer to this question may open the door to expanded research on the teaching and learning of political skill in college.

Both concepts, political skill and self-efficacy, may be understood as social-cognitive constructs (Bandura, 1986; Ferris, Perrewé, & Douglas, 2002), and both would reflect aspects of an individual's self-control and influence (Bandura, 2001; Ferris, et al., 2011). Bandura (1994) suggests that self-efficacy is a determinant of how people think, behave, and feel about their ability to reach desired outcomes. Empirical studies of behavioral domains ranging from academic success to tobacco cessation (e.g., Lenz, 2008; Schwarzer & Fuchs, 1995; Zajacova, Lynch, & Espenshade, 2005) have confirmed Bandura's (1986) belief that behavioral change is facilitated by an individual's perceived sense of self-efficacy. It is likely that similar findings would be observed with respect to other domains and other skills, including political skill.

Ferris, et al. (2005), describe four political skill dimensions: social astuteness, interpersonal influence, networking ability, and apparent sincerity. Socially-astute people possess a keen understanding of how the behaviors of others impact social interactions. Networking ability refers to the ability to develop and use networks of people who can provide a person the kind of positive experiences needed to strengthen their influence on others. With respect to apparent sincerity, the politically skilled person strives to be viewed as being non-manipulative. With respect to interpersonal influence, Ferris, Treadway, Perrewé, Brouer, Douglas, and Lux (2007, p. 292) have said: "Politically skilled individuals have an unassuming and convincing personal style that exerts a powerful influence on others around them."

The conceptualization and resultant measurement of political skill emerged in the field of management where individual differences in training, experience, and natural talent for influencing others often are prerequisites for career advancement. Political skill appears to be dispositional (Ferris et al., 2007), and thus the workplace would not be the only place where political skill might be demonstrated, practiced, and taught. The classroom is another setting in which political skill may be practiced and exercised. Student differences in natural talent may have enabled some students to develop political talent earlier than other students. Additionally, students differ in life and work experiences and those with more experience may bring better developed interpersonal skills like political skill to bear on their college experience.

Bandura's (1997) suggestion that an individual's sense of self-efficacy should be observed in correspondence with the outcome of interest has led to the development of many task-specific measures (e.g., condom use self-efficacy, Brafford & Beck, 1991; drug resistance self-efficacy, Ellickson & Hays, 1991; eating self-efficacy, Glynn & Ruderman, 1986). Alternately, the concept of general self-efficacy captures a person's broad and relatively stable, task-free perceptions of competence (Schwarzer, 1991). Measures of general self-efficacy have become preferable when the behaviors of interest are varied and complex (e.g., Schwarzer, 1992; Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995; Kadiravan & Kumar, 2012), as is the case of political skill. As such this author opted to focus on a generalized form of self-efficacy in his effort to assess the strength of the relation between self-efficacy and political skill.

## **Hypotheses:**

The author is striving to promote the study of interrelations between these two constructs—self-efficacy and political skill—by examining the strength of the bivariate correlations between generalized

self-efficacy and four types of political skill (networking ability, interpersonal influence, social astuteness, and apparent sincerity) among college students. A significant and positive correlation is expected between measures of general self-efficacy and social astuteness, networking ability, interpersonal influence, and apparent sincerity among college students participating in this study. The degree to which individual differences in political skill among college students relate to general self-efficacy would be expected to be significant and positive in direction, but perhaps small to moderate in size given that self-efficacy is not a singular determinant of political skill (Ferris, et al., 2007).

## **METHOD:**

### **Subjects:**

The sample consisted of 168 undergraduate students enrolled full-time at a university in Northern Florida (70% female, 30% male) during the month of October, 2012. Responses were voluntary and conditions of consent were approved by an Institutional Review Board.

## **MEASURES:**

**General self-efficacy:** Schwarzer's (1992) general self-efficacy scale was administered. The general self-efficacy scale was created to measure a general sense of perceived self-efficacy; that is, to estimate coping with daily stressors and adjusting to the varied and sundry forms of stressful experiences in life. Samples of the ten items (coefficient alpha, .92) include: "I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough." "It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals". Response options ranged from 1 = "Not at all true" to 4 = "Exactly true," and responses were averaged to build a composite score ranging from one (1) to four (4).

**Political Skill:** The 18-item political skill inventory (Ferris, et al., 2005) served as the measure of political skill, except that references to work were removed to create context free measures of the four facets of political skill: networking ability, social astuteness, apparent sincerity, and interpersonal influence. The assumption behind use of a context-free measure is that political skill is useful in pursuing a broad array of either work-related or non-work-related goals. The words "at work" were cut from six items, including the following networking item: "I spend a lot of time and effort [at work] networking with others." Other (unmodified) items included: "I always seem to instinctively know the right things to say and do to influence others." "I am able to make most people feel comfortable and at ease around me." Coefficient alpha estimates of internal consistency (see Table1) met or exceeded .89 for each facet. The response options ranged from 1="strongly disagree" to 7="strongly agree."

## **RESULTS:**

Table 1 presents summary statistics (means and standard deviations), coefficient alpha, and Pearson product-moment bivariate correlations. The bivariate correlations between general self-efficacy and each type of political skill warrant inspection in regards to study hypotheses. Correlations exceeding .13 and .17 were statistically significant at probability levels of .05 and .01, respectively. As hypothesized, positive and statistically significant bivariate correlations were observed between general self-efficacy and each of the four political skill facets (each correlation exceeding  $r = .33$ ;  $p < .01$ .)

## **DISCUSSION:**

Is there a significant relationship between self-efficacy and political skill for college students? It seems that there is: the observed correlations are consistent with the hypothesis that statistically significant, positive correlations would be observed between general self-efficacy and networking ability, social astuteness, interpersonal influence and apparent sincerity. A conclusion that students with greater confidence, as measured by their level of general self-efficacy, will possess stronger networking ability, social astuteness, interpersonal influence and apparent sincerity, compared to those students with lower confidence levels, appears to be justified. What does this conclusion about the relation between self-efficacy and political skill mean in terms of educational theory, research and practice?

Ferris, et al. (2011), as noted earlier, suggest that self-efficacy is among the dispositional and personal attributes which explain individual differences in political skill in the workplace. Generalizing this hypothesis to college students seems reasonable based on the findings reported here (subject to replication). Other dispositional and personal attributes suggested as antecedents of political skill in the workplace include perceptiveness (such as self-monitoring), affability, active influence, and developmental experiences such as role modeling and mentoring (Ferris, et al., 2011), each of which may be worth attention in describing empirically the political skill differences of college students.

Additionally, development of models of the consequences of political skill on student behaviors may prove to be worthwhile. The workplace model proffered by Ferris, et al. (2011) addresses the benefits of developing political skill for employees. For students, though, future research and theory development would seem to be needed to better understand the relationship between general self-efficacy, political skill, and such outcome variables as grade point average, retention, and graduation rates. Future research is needed to confirm that improvements in such outcomes as college retention or graduation rates would result for students after being trained in networking ability, interpersonal influence, social astuteness, and apparent sincerity

In considering educational practices, providing our students with opportunities to hone this important skill set prior to entering the workforce would enable them to become all the more competitive in the classroom as well as later in their careers. The college setting is ripe with opportunities for students to hone the political skill they will need in college and later in their careers. Interactions with faculty and advisors, student services such as leadership training, and officer and member roles in student clubs and associations are among the formalized and informal opportunities for practicing political skill. Additionally, some value may be gained by referring students to self-assessment tools. Students may measure their political skill levels using instruments available for free on the internet. The internet provides access to numerous diagnostic tools to guide students in pinpointing very specific areas for practice. The enhanced self-awareness made possible by completing self-assessments of political skill may be quite informative to a student, providing some direction to their self-guided development.

This study is not without limitations. A set of well-known limitations apply to any form of survey research when all data is self-reported at the same time, the most salient of which are questions of causality and generalizability. Questions of causality must be taken seriously when making distinctions between predictor and outcome variables, and the standard argument made in defense of causal assertions made after a correlation study is to rely on extant theory. The author leaves such causal assertions to others. Concerning generalizability, for now conclusions must be limited to the study sample. Generalizability of the findings of this study can only be addressed by attempting to replicate findings in other settings and with other participants.

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**Table 1. Means, Standard Deviations, Correlations, and Reliability Estimates.**

Variables	Mean	St. D.	1	2	3	4	5				
1 Self-efficacy	3.2	.51	.92								
2 Social	2.7	1.40	.43	.89							
3 Networking	3.5	1.32	.38	.59	.91						
4 Sincerity	2.1	1.54	.33	.67	.63	.94					
5 Interpersonal	2.5	1.51	.38	.67	.59	.66	.95				

**Note:** N = 168;  $r > .13$ ,  $p < .05$ ;  $r > .17$ ;  $p < .01$  Coefficient alpha reliability estimates are reported on the diagonal.

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