

Academic motivation suffers when economic mobility seems out of reach

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New studies from Northwestern University show that high school and college students from low socioeconomic status (SES) backgrounds are much less motivated to overcome academic hardships when they have doubts about the likelihood of people from their backgrounds achieving upward mobility.

The new studies extend previous research demonstrating that low-SES students who see education as a viable path to upward mobility are more inclined to succeed in their educational pursuits despite the numerous academic barriers facing students from [disadvantaged backgrounds](#).

"Prior research has shown that students from low-SES backgrounds are motivated to persist during difficult academic experiences when they feel school can concretely contribute to future socioeconomic success," said Alexander Browman, lead author of the studies and a recent Ph.D. graduate in psychology from the Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences at Northwestern. "Our new studies extend this work by showing that this motivational pathway can be affected by whether or not they feel that that goal of achieving socioeconomic mobility is ultimately possible in the society in which they live."

In three studies, the researchers either measured students' beliefs about how attainable mobility was in their society or presented them with information that suggested that mobility was more or less likely to occur in their society. They found that students from lower-SES backgrounds who had or were led to hold doubts about the likelihood of mobility were

less inclined to persist when they faced academic difficulty.

The authors highlight that these findings suggest new potential intervention strategies for motivating students to persist when they experience difficulty at school.

At the same time, they emphasize that their results do not imply that low-SES students who underperform do so simply because they hold misguided beliefs about mobility that can be casually corrected.

"The belief among some low-SES youth and young adults that mobility is unrealistic in their society is likely deep-seated, resulting from a lifetime of concrete experiences that cast doubt upon the plausibility that people from their background can experience mobility in that [society](#)," Browman said. "What this implies is that in order to promote meaningful sustained academic effort, researchers, educators and policymakers should consider what sorts of systemic changes to the educational environment might provide these students with concrete routes to mobility that are viable for students from their backgrounds."

The article, "Perceptions of socioeconomic mobility influence academic persistence among [low socioeconomic status](#) students," was recently published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Provided by Northwestern University

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