

# From Heteronomy to Autonomy: A Study on the Mechanism of Student Affairs Counselors Driving the Internalization of Student Learning Motivation in Academic Atmosphere Construction

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## Abstract

At present, there is a basic, deep-seated problem in academic atmosphere construction of universities. Most universities have plenty of clear rules and policies in place, but students still do not have real inner desire to learn. The deep reason is that the psychological path of outside rules to internal motivation is blocked. Regulations on the Construction of College Student Affairs Counselor Teams (Ministry of Education Order No. 43) clearly state student affairs counselors play a very important part, and points out what student affairs counselors should mainly do in the construction of academic atmosphere. This article takes Self-Determination Theory as its main analysis tool. It builds a step-by-step action system of rule recognition, competence confidence, and value internalization. According to the study, student affairs counselors meet students' need for relatedness by explaining rules clearly. It helps students move from following outside rules to accepting rules themselves, and promotes the transformation of external regulation into introjected regulation; meet students' need for competence by giving students clear guidance. It helps students move from just accepting rules to truly valuing them, and promotes the transformation of introjected regulation to identified regulation; meet students' need for autonomy by setting realistic role models. It helps students turn valued rules into a natural part of who they are, and promotes the transformation of identified regulation to integrated regulation. This mechanism provides theoretical support and an operable path for changing how we manage academic atmosphere. This change moves our focus from punishing after problems happen to supporting students along the way. It also expands the research perspective for the professional development of the student affairs counselor team.

## Keywords

Academic atmosphere construction; student affairs counselor; motivation internalization; Self-Determination Theory.

## 1. Introduction

The construction of academic atmosphere is the basic project for colleges to implement the fundamental task of educating students with good moral character. In recent years, colleges and universities have established an academic atmosphere system covering class attendance management, early academic warning, scholarship evaluation, etc., but formalism still exists widely in policy implementation [1]. Academic atmosphere construction in the new era has its own unique features and requirements [2]. Students passively follow the rules and lack active recognition, get academic support from schools but fail to build ability and confidence. They know many stories about excellent role models but cannot turn these stories into their own real actions. These situations are very common in universities [3]. The final effect of academic atmosphere building is much worse than expected.

The root of this dilemma lies in the broken chain of transforming external educational into students' own learning motivation. Strict management rules can keep high class attendance rates, but it is difficult to make students really focus on learning deeply; schools provide enough academic support resources, but students who have trouble learning often feel helpless no matter what they do, and attribute difficulties to unchangeable factors [4]; role model promotion activities are carried out on a regular basis, but most students regard it as a narrative that has nothing to do with themselves, which motivates them to fail to turn these stories into continuous action. All these problems show one key point: there is a big gap between outside pressure and students' inner desire to learn, which requires a special group of people to assume the transformation function from outside rules into students' inner acceptance. This change goes from following school rules to really believing in these rules.

From the perspective of official job responsibilities, we can see student affairs counselors are the right people for this job. Regulations on the Construction of College Student Affairs Counselor Teams (Ministry of Education Order No. 43), Article 5, Paragraph 3, clearly says academic atmosphere building is one of the nine main jobs of student affairs counselors. It requires student affairs counselors to "stimulate students' interest in learning, guide students to form good study habits, grasp correct learning methods, instruct students in extracurricular science and technology academic practice activities, and create a strong learning atmosphere" [5]. The Opinions on Strengthening the Construction of College Student Affairs Counselor Teams in the New Era further emphasizes the need to improve student affairs counselors' professional competence and ideological work capabilities [6]. Student affairs counselors are at the most important position in the four-level education system. This system includes university, department, class, and dormitory levels. Student affairs counselors carry out school policies directly with students. They stay with students during their whole time at university. Most existing studies only talk about the daily work of student affairs counselors [1][2]. There is a lack of systematic construction of the internal mechanism. This mechanism concerns how student affairs counselors leverage their statutory roles to become promoters of motivation internalization. This paper adopts Self-Determination Theory(SDT) as the analytical framework. It integrates the statutory duties of student affairs counselors. It constructs a three-dimensional catalytic transformation mechanism. This mechanism illustrates how student affairs counselors drive the internalization of students' learning motivation. It provides a theoretical perspective for improving university academic atmosphere construction. It also facilitates the professional development of student affairs counselors.

## **2. Theoretical Basis and Analytical Framework**

### **2.1. Core Meaning of Self-Determination Theory**

SDT states that internal motivation arises. It arises when the external environment continuously satisfies three basic psychological needs. The needs are autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to the perception that behavior stems from one's own will. Competence refers to the belief that one has the ability to meet challenges. Relatedness refers to the feeling of being accepted and cared for by significant others. The social environment helps people meet these basic needs. Outside rules then slowly become part of people's own ideas. This change happens step by step. It goes from surface level to deep inside, from external regulation that completely depends on rewards or punishments from outside, to the introjected regulation of acting to avoid feeling guilty, and then to the identified regulation of the real value of these rules, and finally integrating self-belief to form an integrated regulation, becoming a steady and lasting inner motivation [7] [8].

SDT further points out that support for basic psychological needs will not happen by itself. It needs important people around us to help and guide us [9]. In university education, student

affairs counselors are exactly these important people for students. Student affairs counselors link the school's learning environment with how students feel inside. The school's rules, support resources, and role model examples all need to be delivered to students through the daily work of student affairs counselors. Only in this way can they become educational interventions targeting students. Whether students can have their basic psychological needs satisfied through these interventions largely depends on student affairs counselors' message delivery methods. It also depends on their explanatory logic.

### 2.2. Analysis of Theoretical Fit

SDT and student affairs counselors' academic atmosphere construction work are highly compatible. The essence of academic atmosphere construction is to promote the transformation of students' learning motivation. The transformation shifts from external requirements to internal identification. This matches the core research topic of SDT. The statutory duties of student affairs counselors also align with SDT's educational intervention principles. Daily management satisfies the need for relatedness. Academic guidance satisfies the need for competence. Value guidance satisfies the need for autonomy. These systematically drive motivation internalization.

### 2.3. Analytical Framework for Counselor-Driven Motivation Internalization

Based on the above theoretical logic, this paper integrates the statutory duties of student affairs counselors. It constructs a three-stage progressive three-dimensional catalytic transformation mechanism. The three stages are rule recognition, competence confidence, and value internalization. The three dimensions follow a progressive logic from shallow to deep. Rule recognition is the prerequisite. It solves the problem of why rules should be followed. Competence confidence is the foundation. It solves the problem of whether one can learn well. Value internalization is the core. It solves the problem of why one should learn. The three-dimensional analytical framework is shown in Table 1.

These three parts connect closely with each other. They form a complete chain of transformation. This chain moves from heteronomy to autonomy.

**Table 1.** Three-Dimensional Analytical Framework for Student Affairs Counselors Driving Student Learning Motivation Internalization

Dimension	Core Internalization Difficulty	Key Catalytic Behaviors	Satisfied Psychological Need	Motivation Transformation Stage
Institutional Strengthening	Instrumental rationality of rules stands out. Passive rule following.	Explanatory implementation, early-warning care, etc.	Relatedness	External regulation → Introjected regulation
Assistance and Relief	Learned helplessness. Denying one's own learning ability.	Precise attribution guidance, small success experiences, etc.	Competence	Introjected regulation → Identified regulation
Role Model Navigation	Role model stories are disconnected from real life. Meaning is missing.	Finding relatable role models. Breaking down experience methods, etc.	Autonomy	Identified regulation → Integrated regulation

### **3. Three-Dimensional Catalytic Pathways for Counselors Driving Motivation Internalization**

#### **3.1. Institutional Strengthening: The Transformation Pathway for Rule Recognition**

The core mechanism of rule recognition catalysis is to promote the transformation of motivation from external regulation to introjected regulation by transforming the rigid rules into educational care, meeting students' need for relatedness and eliminating their psychological resistance to outside rules. Practice shows that there are significant differences in the implementation effect of the same rule in different classes. The most important thing is whether student affairs counselors have completed the decoding and translation from the rigid rule into something students can understand psychologically.

Explanatory implementation requires student affairs counselors to go beyond simple notification and communication, systematically explain why these rules are made and how rules protect students' academic development, so that the rules can be transformed from outside restrictions into common agreements for everyone. When students first agree with the reasonableness of these rules, the students' need for relatedness will be initially met. Early-warning care is to transform the abnormality of academic data from a disciplinary basis into a sign that students need help. When the counselor understands the students' difficulties through individual communication rather than public criticism, the implementation of the rules shifts from punishing mistakes to supporting students' growth. Students feel respected and cared for, and the Rule recognition starts to become part of students' own thinking. Process intervention shifts the academic warning from the end of the semester to the middle of the semester, so that students can get timely support when there is still enough time to make changes. They personally feel that rules help them succeed. Behavior consolidation helps students turn their awareness of rules into stable habits through repeated daily practices such as morning reading check-ins and phone-free classrooms, so that the educational effect of rules lasts for a long time. All these actions meet students' need to feel connected. They help students move their understanding of rules from external regulation to introjected regulation. This builds a good foundation for developing students' competence later.

#### **3.2. Assistance and Relief: The Empowerment Pathway for Competence Confidence**

Competence confidence catalysis works in this way. Students' understanding of their own learning ability gets rebuilt. Their need to feel capable is met. The bad circle of learned helplessness is broken. Their motivation then moves from introjected regulation to identified regulation. Just pouring knowledge into students can fill gaps in their learning. It cannot rebuild students' confidence in their academic abilities [10].

Clear attribution guidance starts this rebuilding of students' thinking. Weiner's Attribution Theory says how people explain their success and failure affects what they do next [10]. A student might think they fail at school because they are not smart enough. Student affairs counselors help them look at this in a different way. They move from blaming things they cannot change to things they can change. New ways of thinking focus on learning methods or time management. This change in thinking makes students willing to accept help later. Creating small success experiences helps students build belief in their own abilities. Bandura's Self-efficacy Theory says belief in your abilities comes mostly from things you have succeeded at yourself [11]. Student affairs counselors should not only look at final exam scores. They should help student tutoring pairs set small, step-by-step goals. Reaching each small goal breaks students' fixed idea that "I can't do it". Student affairs counselors give clear, positive comments on every small improvement. Students slowly feel more and more capable. Showing progress

clearly uses personal academic growth files. It uses real numbers to show how students' behavior has changed. Students can see their own progress very clearly. Real facts take the place of what students just think is true. Making support more available moves academic help from offices to one-stop student centers. Students feel less afraid to ask for help. The problem of academic help not reaching students well gets better. All these actions meet students' need to feel capable. They help students change their thinking about learning from introjected regulation to identified regulation.

### **3.3. Role Model Navigation: The Sublimation Pathway for Value Internalization**

The core mechanism of value internalization catalysis is to meet students' need for autonomy by providing imitable role models and self-narrative platforms, so that learning can be transformed from something others ask them to do into a lifestyle they choose for themselves, so as to promote the transformation of motivation from identified regulation to integrated regulation.

Identifying relatable role models is the first step for realizing the vicarious reinforcement effect. High-end role models such as national scholarship recipients are too far away from ordinary students, and it is difficult to inspire alternative experience. Bandura's Social Learning Theory shows that when an individual observes the success of others who are similar to themselves, there will be a strong vicarious reinforcement effect [11]. Student affairs counselors should find ordinary role models from students' daily lives, and set up small honors like Progress Star and Study Enthusiast, so that students then believe they can reach goals through hard work. The methodological disassembly of excellent experience solves the problem of role model imitability. Counselors need to guide students to look at the methods behind good results, break down excellence into specific and doable steps, and make it an adoptable methods students can use. On this basis, activities such as growth portfolio shows and study method sharing meetings will be held to make the good academic atmosphere becomes something students can see and learn from. Sharing learning stories and finding meaning is a higher level of role model guidance. Its essence is to let students shift from passively watching the excellence of others to actively becoming the narrative subject of their own hard work stories. Counselors can organize activities such as learning Vlog making and struggle story collection activities to encourage students to record and share their daily learning. When students show their own hard work, they construct the meaning of learning for themselves unconsciously. These stories spread on campus online platforms. A diffusion effect emerges among peer groups. Self-directed learning becomes a widely accepted group culture. By meeting students' need for autonomy, the above-mentioned behavior promotes learning cognition from identified regulation to integrated regulation, and finally forms a stable internal learning motivation.

## **4. Conclusion and Outlook**

The deep-seated problem of university academic atmosphere construction is as follows. The psychological chain transforming external educational interventions into internal motivation has not been effectively connected. This paper adopted SDT as the analytical framework. It integrated the statutory duties of student affairs counselors. It constructed a three-stage progressive three-dimensional catalytic transformation mechanism. The mechanism includes rule recognition, competence confidence, and value internalization. It demonstrates the professional role of student affairs counselors in this transformation chain. The innovations of this study mainly lie in two aspects. It organically integrates the statutory duties of student affairs counselors with the motivation internalization continuum of SDT. It reveals the professional value of student affairs counselors in academic atmosphere construction. It constructs a three-stage progressive catalytic transformation mechanism. It gives a practical way to solve the "strict outside, loose inside" problem in academic atmosphere building.

This mechanism also gives a new angle for student affairs counselors' professional growth. Colleges and universities can learn from the student motivation strategies from SDT, and help student affairs counselors learn methods to help students turn outside motivation into inner drive through special training on motivational interviewing and cognitive behavioral guidance. Academic atmosphere building in the new era has its own unique features. Future research can use longitudinal tracking designs. This can test how well this mechanism works over a long period of time. It can explore different transformation paths for different student groups. It can also build an evaluation system. This system measures student affairs counselors' ability to help students transform their motivation.

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