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Factors Influencing the Healthy Development and Success of University Students: A Text Analysis of 113 "College Student of the Year" Awardees

Name: SHAO Jie

China University of Geosciences (Wuhan)

Email 1143135164@qq.com

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on life-course theory, this study conducts a content analysis of the advanced deeds of 113 recipients of the national "College Student of the Year" award over roughly the past decade. The analysis reveals that: (a) under the life-long development dimension, development motivation steers students toward developmental trajectories; (b) within the agency dimension, individual action and decision-making play a dominant role; (c) under the time-space dimension, the student development capacity of higher education institutions still requires improvement; (d) under the timing dimension, early accumulation and developmental opportunities are non-substitutable; and (e) under the linked lives dimension, family support and mentoring relationships guide life ideals. Additional findings indicate that healthy development and success require integrating personal motivation with the needs of the nation and the people; multidimensional influences jointly shape development, among which individual agency is paramount; access to high-quality education and distinguished mentors is critical; success is not merely a matter of luck but primarily of "cumulative advantage"; and family background is not decisive—family attitudes are. Finally, the study discusses the complexity, temporality, and harmony of the factors influencing university students' healthy development and success.

1. Introduction

"The country has a future and the nation has hope when the young generation has ideals, skills, and a sense of responsibility." This statement by the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at its core positions the goals for youth talent in the new era (Ai, Jiao, & Song, 2018). According to the 2020 Statistical Bulletin on National Educational Development, the total number of university students in China has

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exceeded 40 million (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China [MOE], 2021). How university students can achieve healthy development and success is therefore a pressing question. The awardees of the College Student of the Year program, jointly guided by the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, the Ministry of Education, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, and the People's Daily, constitute exemplary representatives of this cohort. How did they become top talents? How do their trajectories differ? What factors influence their development? Addressing these questions offers useful implications both for nurturing different types of top talent and for the high-quality development of higher education.

2. Research Method

1) Research Objectives

This study focuses on the College Student of the Year selection jointly guided by the Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, the Ministry of Education, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, and the People's Daily, and hosted by People.cn, China University Students Online, and Guangming Daily's Education Channel. We examine 113 awardees selected over approximately the past decade. They are typical representatives among tens of millions of university students in recent years. Male awardees far outnumber females (77%), and 64.6% are CPC members. Nearly half (47.79%) come from "985 Project" institutions, with only nine from higher vocational colleges. Awardees span doctoral, master's, bachelor's, and junior college levels, with the largest share being undergraduates. Majors cover natural sciences, humanities, and social sciences, with social sciences the largest category (Table 1).

Based on their documented deeds, the 113 awardees are grouped into six categories: (a) Academic Research—strong research competence and outstanding achievements in their fields; (b) Innovation and Entrepreneurship—active engagement with innovation notable in mass entrepreneurship and outcomes; (c) Self-Strengthening—overcoming adversity with perseverance and optimism; (d) Courageous and Righteous Acts—self-sacrificing actions in the face of threats to life and property; (e) Patriotism and Professionalism-strong love of country and outstanding performance in their roles; and (f) Arts and Sports—excellence in cultural or athletic endeavors.

Table 1. Basic profile of national College Student of the Year awardees, 2011–2020.

Variable	Category	N	%
Gender	Male	87	77.0
	Female	26	23.0
Ethnicity	Han	95	84.07
	Uyghur	6	5.31
	Tibetan	2	1.77
	Other minorities	10	8.85

Political status	CPC member	73	64.60
	CYL member	26	23.01
	Masses	1	0.89
	Unspecified	13	11.50
Institution type	Project 985	54	47.79
	Project 211	23	20.35
	Regular undergraduate	27	23.89
	Higher vocational	9	7.97
Degree level	Doctoral	30	26.55
	Master's	22	19.47
	Bachelor's	51	45.13
	Junior college	10	8.85
Field of study	Natural sciences	22	19.47
	Social sciences	84	74.34
	Humanities	7	6.19
Awardee	Academic research	29	25.66
category			
	Innovation/entrepreneurship	26	23.01
	Self-strengthening	18	15.93
	Patriotism/professionalism	25	22.12
	Courageous acts	9	7.97
	Arts/sports	6	5.31

Sources: Publicity Department of the CPC Central Committee, the Ministry of Education, the Central Committee of the Communist Youth League, and the People's Daily, and hosted by People.cn, China University Students Online, and Guangming Daily's Education Channel.

2) Data Sources and Coding

The study collected textual materials on awardees' deeds from the annual selection webpages (2011–2020), People.cn, Guangming Daily, and university websites. Using content analysis, the study coded the narratives of 113 awardees by dimensions to identify factors shaping healthy development and success, thereby informing talent cultivation in higher education. To ensure reliability, a lead coder and an assistant coder jointly conducted category coding. Inter-rater agreement (Cohen's K) was 0.90, and content analysis reliability reached 0.95, meeting the ≥0.90 threshold (Zhang, Liu, & Wu, 2016).

3) Analytical Framework

The analytical framework is grounded in life-course theory, which emerged in the United States in the 1920s and has developed into a multidisciplinary theoretical system across psychology, anthropology, history, economics, biology, and more (Mortimer & Shanahan, 2003). The theory emphasizes the interplay between individual development

and sociohistorical change, focusing on life trajectories and addressing questions such as "what influences life and how." Five core principles guide life-course research: life-long development, agency, time and place, timing, and linked lives. Drawing on these principles and on prior studies of factors influencing university students' growth and success (e.g., Li, 2009; Wang, 2019; Ren & Chen, 2019; Tian, 2017; Huang & Huang, 2012), the study designed the category scheme shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Category scheme for factors influencing healthy development and success of awardees.

Dimension	Subcategory	Description
Life-long development	Development motivation	A psychological tendency
		and attitude oriented by
		developmental needs
		toward certain goals
	Development planning	An overall plan for one's
		life course
Agency	Sense of responsibility	Helping others and
		enabling common
		prosperity
	Mental maturity	Accurate
		self-understanding; facing
		setbacks with positivity
	Action execution	Persistent implementation
		of effective learning and
		growth strategies
Time-space	Social practice	Internships,
		entrepreneurship, student
		organizations, and other
		broad activities
	Elite institution advantage	Enrollment in Project
		985/211 or "Double
		First-Class" universities
	Family background	Family atmosphere, social
		status, and income
		supporting development
Timing	Early accumulation	Prior professional study,
		training, or self-study
		aligned with later
		development
	Developmental	Opportunities arising from
	opportunities	policy, institutional
		platforms, or self-directed

		learning
Linked lives	Family support	Support, encouragement,
		and guidance from parents
		and relatives
	Peer support	Support from friends or
		spouses
	Mentoring by	Guidance from renowned
	distinguished faculty	professors or teachers
	Inspiration from role	Motivation from great
	models	figures, athletes, or
		celebrities

Source: by Author.

3. Analyzing the Influencing Factors of College Students' Healthy Development and Achievement

1) Frequency Distribution of Factors Influencing College Students' Healthy Growth and Success

The factors influencing the healthy growth and success of college students involve five major dimensions: the driving forces that support individual development, the exercise of subjective initiative, the impact of life events within specific temporal and spatial contexts, the individual's ability to seize critical "opportunities," and the influence of significant others in one's life. Table 3 presents the frequency with which these dimensions appeared in the growth trajectories of 113 "College Student of the Year" awardees, reflecting the relative importance and practical role of the corresponding influencing factors.

Table 3. Frequency of influencing factors by awardee category (N = 113 awardees)

Dimensio	Acade	Innov./En	Self-stre	Patriot./	Courag	Arts/Sp	Tot
n &	mic	trep.	ngth.	Prof.	eous	orts	al
Factor	(n=29)	(n=26)	(n=18)	(n=25)	(n=9)	(n=6)	
Life-long							
developm							
ent:							
Develop	27	24	13	23	5	5	97
ment							
motivatio							
n							
Develop	12	15	10	16	1	3	57
ment							
planning							
Agency:							
Sense of	20	24	14	25	9	4	96

responsibi							
lity							
Mental	23	25	17	23	5	6	99
maturity							
Action	29	26	18	25	9	6	113
execution							
Time-							
space:							
Social	16	26	12	22	6	4	86
practice							
Elite	22	20	10	21	0	5	78
institution							
advantage							
Family	2	0	1	3	0	0	6
backgrou							
nd							
Timing:							
Early	27	25	6	13	2	5	78
accumulat							
ion							
Develop	2	6	3	5	0	1	17
mental							
opportuni							
ties							
Linked							
lives:							
Family	5	4	8	9	4	3	33
support							
Peer	4	2	1	1	0	0	8
support							
Mentorin	17	4	5	4	0	3	33
g by							
distinguis							
hed							
faculty							
Inspiratio	1	2	1	6	0	0	10
n from							
role							
models							
	<u> </u>						

Sources: By Author.

${\it A}$. Support from Motivational Factors in Individual Development

Developmental motivation and planning are two primary driving forces that influence whether college students can achieve personal growth. Regarding motivation, 97 "College Student of the Year" awardees explicitly stated their developmental needs and goals. Within their narratives, motives such as patriotism and poverty alleviation, dedication to scientific research, innovation and invention, devotion to education, and service to the people appeared with high frequency. Overall, the development motivation of these students mainly stemmed from two sources: personal interests and attachment to their hometowns. With respect to developmental planning, more than half (57 students) had specific ideas and strategies for their future, including developmental pathways, the application of personal strengths, and learning methods. Expressions such as "planning," "pursuing a path," and "progressing step by step" frequently appeared in their accounts.

B. Exercise of Individual Agency

As shown in Table 3, the frequency distribution of factors related to agency was consistently above 95, suggesting that the exercise of individual initiative was fully demonstrated in the growth of the 113 awardees. Specifically, action execution emerged as the most prominent feature, reflected in the ability to master appropriate learning methods and strategies, self-management, self-regulation, self-motivation, and effective time management. A strong sense of responsibility and mental maturity were also key elements enabling the exercise of individual agency. Approximately 90% of the students gave back to the nation, society, and hometown through scientific research, grassroots service, agricultural poverty alleviation, charitable donations, or military service. These benevolent acts and the noble qualities they reflect exemplify the "virtue" and "moral conduct" of outstanding contemporary college students.

C. Impact of Life Events in Specific Contexts

For about 76% of the awardees, participation in social practice represented a significant life event in their developmental trajectories. Their narratives demonstrate that such experiences enhanced their initiative. In addition, more than half of the students studied at prestigious universities. Institutions under the "985 Project" and "211 Project" provided opportunities for professional advancement, skill development, and self-expression. Although family background is undoubtedly important for student growth, it was mentioned only six times in the sample, suggesting that a favorable family environment or financial resources are not necessary conditions for healthy student development. Conversely, nearly half of the awardees came from rural families with limited resources. Such hardship cultivated resilience, perseverance, and a stronger appreciation for educational opportunities, thereby motivating self-development.

D. Seizing Critical "Opportunities"

The issue of timing emphasizes the sequential nature of life events, a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of life-course research (Kang and Wang, 2020). Opportunities

should be understood from two perspectives: (a) the accumulation of personal competencies is the foundation for obtaining opportunities, and (b) opportunities are critical for individual development. In this study, most awardees had engaged in professional study, training, or self-learning before opportunities arose. Unfortunately, the frequency of opportunities was only 17, indicating, to some extent, misalignment between government macro-level adjustments and student development, insufficient societal dynamism, delayed institutional support from universities, and limited opportunities arising from students' self-learning processes. Hence, governments, society, universities, and students themselves need to make practical improvements.

E. Influence of Significant Others

The influence of significant others in the lives of these awardees cannot be underestimated. Closely linked to life events, key stakeholders such as family members, friends, university mentors, and societal role models all played supportive roles in their development. However, it should be noted that not all significant others were supportive. In certain critical decision-making or bottleneck stages, some students encountered discouragement from family or friends. This finding indirectly suggests that, in the developmental process of college students, the dimension of subjective agency exerted a stronger influence than that of significant others.

2) Differences in Types of Influencing Factors for College Students' Healthy Growth and Talent Development

In the growth process of different types of "College Student of the Year" awardees, the distribution and degree of influence of the factors vary to some extent (see Table 4). Specifically, only the innovation and entrepreneurship type shows zero proportion in family background factors; the courage-in-action type shows zero proportion in factors such as elite university support, family background, development opportunities, peer support, mentorship, and idol inspiration; and the cultural and artistic type shows zero proportion in family background, peer support, and idol inspiration factors. Apart from these cases, all other categories of awardees are influenced to varying degrees by the fifteen identified factors.

Table 4. Percentage of awardees within each type exhibiting each factor

Dimensio	Acade	Innov./Ent	Self-stren	Patriot./P	Courage	Arts/Sp
n &	mic	rep.	gth.	rof.	ous	orts
Factor						
Life-long						
developm						
ent:						
Developm	93.10%	92.31%	72.22%	92.00%	55.56%	83.33%
ent						
motivation						

Developm	41.38%	57.69%	55.56%	64.00%	11.11%	50.00%
ent						
planning						
Agency:						
Sense of	68.97%	92.31%	77.78%	100.00%	100.00%	66.67%
responsibil						
ity						
Mental	79.31%	96.15%	94.44%	92.00%	55.56%	100.00%
maturity						
Action	100.00	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%	100.00%
execution	%					
Time-						
space:						
Social	55.17%	100.00%	66.67%	88.00%	66.67%	66.67%
practice						
Elite	75.86%	76.92%	55.56%	84.00%	0.00%	83.33%
institution						
advantage						
Family	6.90%	0.00%	5.56%	12.00%	0.00%	0.00%
backgroun						
d						
Timing:						
Early	93.10%	96.15%	33.33%	52.00%	22.22%	55.56%
accumulati						
on						
Developm	6.90%	23.08%	16.67%	20.00%	0.00%	16.67%
ental						
opportuniti						
es						
Linked						
lives:						
Family	17.24%	15.38%	44.44%	36.00%	44.44%	50.00%
support						
Peer	13.79%	7.69%	5.56%	4.00%	0.00%	0.00%
support						
Mentoring	58.62%	15.38%	27.78%	16.00%	0.00%	50.00%
by						
distinguish						
ed faculty						
Inspiration	3.45%	7.69%	5.56%	24.00%	0.00%	0.00%
from role						
models						

Sources: By Author.

By comparing the analytical dimensions and influencing factors of different types of "College Student of the Year" awardees, several findings emerge.

First, in terms of action execution, all six categories of awardees reached 100%. This indicates that, throughout their growth, they consistently demonstrated self-management, self-regulation, self-motivation, and effective time management through the use of appropriate methods and strategies.

Second, from the perspective of the life-span development dimension, the proportion of development motivation is significantly higher than that of development planning across all six categories. Nevertheless, more than half of the innovation and entrepreneurship type, the self-improvement type, and the patriotism and dedication type awardees demonstrated specific development plans.

Third, from the agency dimension, most influencing factors exceeded 90% across the six categories. The only exceptions are that the factor of mental maturity for the academic research type and the courage-in-action type, as well as the factor of responsibility consciousness for the self-improvement type and the cultural and artistic type, fell below 90%—though still above 50%.

Fourth, from the time-space dimension, social practice was the most influential factor for innovation and entrepreneurship, self-improvement, patriotism and dedication, and courage-in-action awardees. Among these, innovation and entrepreneurship stood out the most, reaching 100%. In contrast, for the academic research and cultural and artistic types, elite university support was the most prominent factor, which mainly manifested through the provision of professional education and institutional platforms.

Fifth, from the timing dimension, prior accumulation emerged as the most influential factor across all six categories, suggesting that prior accumulation serves as an essential foundation for seizing developmental opportunities.

Finally, from the life-related dimension, family support and mentorship were most influential for the innovation and entrepreneurship type and the cultural and artistic type; mentorship was particularly crucial for the academic research type; while family support was the most influential for the self-improvement, patriotism and dedication, and courage-in-action types. These findings highlight the significant role of mentors in fostering professional skills and competencies, as well as the pivotal influence of family in shaping students' moral character.

3) "Five-Dimensional" Analysis

A. Life-span Development Dimension: Development Motivation Guides the Type of Student Growth

According to the above analysis of the life-span development dimension, all six categories of "College Student of the Year" awardees exhibited a relatively high proportion of development motivation factors. In the textual accounts of their deeds,

the sources of development motivation can generally be divided into two categories: personal interest and affection for hometown. In addition, there are some individual cases where development motivation was triggered by family circumstances, personal health conditions, and other specific factors. For example, Wang Kaiyong (14th awardee) expressed his determination: "Strengthening the nation through science and technology, writing a patriotic aspiration with my work"; while Wang Qingcan (10th awardee) said: "Mathematics is my true passion, as well as the lifelong career and dream I will pursue." Different types of motivation point to different developmental directions, thereby shaping students into different types of talents. This indicates that development motivation plays a guiding role in determining student development. Accordingly, universities should encourage the development of students' individual interests, provide differentiated education tailored to their specific conditions, and strengthen ideological and civic education to guide students in serving the nation and their communities.

B. Agency Dimension: Individual Action and Decision-Making Dominate Student Development

From the perspective of the agency dimension, its influencing factors had the highest proportion among the awardees, particularly the factor of action execution. External conditions only exert influence through internal responses, and student development is no exception. Thus, it is crucial to fully leverage the agency of individuals. In their growth process, awardees were able to design action plans according to their own situations, or make corresponding choices in response to evolving circumstances, thereby achieving their goals. This suggests that individual action and decision-making occupy a dominant position in student development. Accordingly, students should select and employ learning methods suited to their individual conditions, and continuously refine them for greater effectiveness. They should also develop skills of self-management, self-motivation, and self-regulation, and persistently act in line with self-set goals and plans. Time management is especially critical. In this study, 86 awardees were described as "active figures" during their college years, adept at classifying tasks by urgency and importance and allocating time efficiently.

C. Time-Space Dimension: The Need to Improve Universities' Educational Capacity Student growth and development unfold within specific historical contexts of time and space, which both shape and constrain them. The analysis above indicates that students achieved development through social practice, yet the supporting role of elite university resources was relatively weak. Meanwhile, in textual narratives, awardees such as Ma Renyi, Wang Qingcan, and Zhao Zheng explicitly expressed deep gratitude to their universities for professional education and broad platforms. This shows that participation in social practice was mostly facilitated through university channels. Since family background often contains unchangeable objective factors, universities have become a crucial component within the time-space dimension of student growth.

Accordingly, higher education institutions urgently need to enhance their educational capacity by cultivating a positive academic ethos, fostering a strong scholarly atmosphere, building high-quality and wide-ranging platforms, and providing both vertically specialized and horizontally interdisciplinary education.

D. Timing Dimension: The Irreversibility of Prior Accumulation and Development Opportunities

From the perspective of timing, prior accumulation (such as professional education and training) was much more influential than development opportunities. The sequence of knowledge and skill accumulation determines the smoothness of individual growth. Clearly, only by making sufficient preparation can students seize opportunities when they arise. Whether students can grasp opportunities in time depends not only on their comprehensive qualities but also on the extent to which governments, society, and universities provide enabling conditions for the emergence of opportunities. The preceding analysis revealed that awardees fully exercised individual agency and were often able to secure platforms for leapfrog development at opportune moments. This reflects their high level of overall competence. To better seize opportunities, students must first engage in sufficient prior accumulation to strengthen their capabilities; at the same time, governments, society, and universities should pool resources, cultivate distinctive industries, and expand educational platforms in alignment with student needs.

E. Life-Related Dimension: The Guiding Role of Family and Mentorship in Shaping Life Ideals

The analysis of the life-related dimension highlights the outstanding importance of family support and mentorship in student growth. Families exert a foundational and enduring influence, primarily shaping students' values, moral orientations, and other fundamental personality traits. For instance, Xu Meng (9th awardee) noted: "I was born into an ordinary working family. From a young age, my parents and grandparents taught me to help others and to be a good person. (National Center for Nanoscience and Technology, 2017)" By contrast, mentors exert a guiding and long-term influence, mainly affecting the establishment of students' developmental goals and the selection of pathways for their realization. Therefore, in cultivating students, families should model positive values and consciously provide correct guidance; universities should give full play to the role of mentors in guiding students' developmental trajectories, build excellent faculty teams, and enhance teachers' awareness of their mission as role models and guides.

3. Conclusion and Discussion

Life course theory holds that the developing individual is a dynamic whole, neither a passive bearer simply subject to social trajectories, nor merely a collection of elements such as emotions, cognition, and motivation (Xu & Xu, 2009). Based on several core

concepts of the life course paradigm (lifelong development, agency, time and space, timing, linked lives), the above analysis of the texts of "China College Students of the Year" leads to the following conclusions and discussion.

1) Conclusions

A. The healthy growth and success of college students must integrate personal development motives with the needs of the nation and the people

"Cultivating oneself, regulating the family, governing the state, bringing peace to the world" reflects the mutually reinforcing and indispensable relationship between self, family, nation, and the world. In the above analysis, regardless of type or developmental background, the development motives of "College Students of the Year" were integrated with the needs of the nation and people. For example, Yang Bing (15th cohort) practiced patriotic ideals by leaving the city to serve as a village cadre; Song Xi (14th cohort) defended the country through military service. Thus, the realization of personal value must serve the nation and people to achieve healthy growth and success.

B. Healthy growth and success is the result of multidimensional interaction, with individual agency being the most crucial factor

"Diligence makes up for clumsiness; one reaps what one sows." The healthy growth and success of college students result from multiple interacting factors, with personal effort playing a decisive role. Time, timing, and linked lives are conditions for development; lifelong development and personal agency are internal bases, while external causes act through internal ones. On the one hand, when external advantages exist, students must still exercise agency, otherwise achievements will be limited. For instance, Liu Lu (7th cohort), though recognized for mathematical talent, was praised for his ability to endure solitude and focus. On the other hand, students with disadvantaged external conditions can still succeed through persistence, as exemplified by Liu Daomin (15th cohort), a disabled Paralympic gold medalist who broke world records (Li, Li, & Wang, 2014).

C. Access to quality education and guidance from distinguished mentors is crucial

"The way of the university is to manifest virtue, to love the people, and to pursue the highest good." Excellence is not innate; growth and success depend on quality educational environments. Such environments include first-class universities with resources, peer learning communities, and mentorship from renowned scholars. For innovation, entrepreneurship, and academic research, distinguished mentors provide experience and foresight to guide students through bottlenecks (Li et al., 2014).

D. Success is not merely a matter of chance but relies on the accumulation of advantages in earlier stages

"Without accumulating small steps, one cannot reach a thousand miles." Growth requires accumulation. "Cumulative advantage" is a key life course concept: early advantages tend to perpetuate benefits in later social positions (Zhou, 2015). While some "College Students of the Year" benefited from opportunities, most relied on prior accumulation. For example, Lü Weizeng (15th cohort) studied agricultural sciences diligently, which enabled him to seize development opportunities later.

E. Family background is not decisive; family attitudes matter most

"The foundation of the world lies in the family." Here, family refers not to economic or social status, but to atmosphere and habits. Most honorees came from poor families, some from intellectual families, showing background is not decisive. Instead, family support was most frequent, especially for students from disadvantaged conditions. For example, Yang Mengheng (10th cohort), physically disabled, was encouraged by his father and taught by his mother, enabling him to excel. Family influence lies mainly in positive guidance and educational support.

2) Discussion

A. Influencing factors are complex

As Leibniz said, "There are no two identical leaves." No two students undergo identical interactions of self and environment. Growth paths differ due to complex, nonlinear, multilevel, and multistage interactions between individuals and their biological, natural, and social environments (Ke & Chai, 2021; Halfon et al., 2014). Student development must be embedded in sociohistorical and cultural contexts; only by considering social and historical perspectives can we understand life courses fully (Kang, Wang, & Pang, 2019).

B. Influencing factors follow temporal sequences

The grasp of opportunities depends on prior cumulative advantage, emphasizing sequence in life events. Most honorees experienced early accumulative training, though some succeeded only after detours. Reviewing cumulative advantage requires attention to school, family, and individual levels. Schools should design programs suited to context, families should cultivate advantages through atmosphere and educational style, and individuals should act timely to enhance competitiveness (Zhou, 2015).

C. Influencing factors exhibit harmony

From physiological to psychological, behavioral, cognitive, and sociocultural levels, growth involves dynamic balance of systems. Interaction between individual and environment is regulated through self-adjustment at biological and psychological levels. Therefore, students must continuously mature physiologically and psychologically, achieving balanced development at critical turning points (Tu, 2025). Enhancing self-regulation promotes socialization and

enables healthy growth and success.

Conflict of interests

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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Researcher profile: Shao, Jie. Email: 1143135164@qq.com. He is a graduate student at China University of Geosciences (Wuhan). His research focuses on the cultivation of innovative talents.