

# Better grades through cash

**Ideas: New programs offer incentives to motivates students to study.**

**By [Brian Whitley](#) | Contributor for The Christian Science Monitor/  
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On college campuses across the country, legions of students spend their weekends compulsively refreshing their e-mail inboxes, noshing on snacks, and maybe doing a month's worth of laundry.

Shouldn't they be studying? Well, sure. They just don't want to.

That might be interpreted as a lack of self-control, or poorly ordered priorities. Leave it to two young people – Jeremy Gelbart, a senior at Queens College in New York, and Steven Wolf, a recent graduate – to declare such sloth a shortcoming of the education system.

“Grades are supposed to motivate students, but I would say more than half of people aren't motivated by grades,” says Mr. Gelbart. The grading system is where some students “are trying to get approval.... But a lot of students aren't looking for that.”

A better motivator, they say, is a little extra spending cash. Last month, the pair launched a website that Gelbart calls a “guilt-free pleasure.” Ultrinsic Motivator organizes competitions around courses at seven universities in the Northeast. Students each pay \$22 to participate, \$20 of which goes toward a pool of prize money. At the end of the course, all the players who earn an “A” receive an equal share of the pot. (Students who already have high GPAs may not enter.)



Bob Staake

Programs that pay students for improved academic performance are sprouting across the country. Unlike Ultrinsic, most aim to bridge the so-called achievement gap that separates poor and minority students from their peers. The controversial initiatives have attracted hundreds of thousands of dollars in grants and donations, with the money dangled as a reward for getting better grades, attending afterschool tutoring, or scoring higher on standardized tests.

“I like to think of it as a book cover and a book. You might buy a book because of the way the cover looks, with the catchy phrases and the title,” says Jackie Cushman, who oversees one such program as head of the Learning Makes a Difference Foundation. “But it’s the intrinsic piece of it that gets you going long-term.”

There are many ways to approach such programs. While Ultrinsic’s opt-in format and element of risk stand out from the crowd, the new business offers a simple, real-world test of the basic learn-to-earn theory. The website even takes its name from the general principle: After “ulterior” motives kick-start studying, students will come to appreciate the “intrinsic” satisfaction of learning.

### **Public schools start writing checks**

Several large school districts are testing the idea. A pilot program that started last fall at 20 Chicago high schools aims to change the habits of 5,000 freshmen. Participants receive a progress report showing their grades every five weeks. Those regular reviews earn \$50 for each A the student receives, \$35 for every B, and \$20 per C.

Advocates of cash incentives say the programs – in the early going, at least – has worked.

Ms. Cushman’s foundation administered the Learn and Earn program to 16 eighth graders and 14 eleventh graders from disadvantaged schools in Fulton County, Ga., last year.

They received \$8 an hour for attending four hours of afterschool math and science tutoring each week. The grades of participants improved, while those of

their peers declined. Program members also became more excited about studying, Cushman says.

But the idea that ulterior motives consistently transition into intrinsic ones remains heavily disputed. Parents often characterize cash payments as shameless bribes, and academics point to studies suggesting that external motivation can have the opposite effect.

Research by Edward Deci, a psychology professor at the University of Rochester, often feeds arguments against such programs.

In one of his studies, a group of college students that were paid to solve puzzles often quit brain-teasers altogether when the experiment (and the payments) ended. Students in the experiment who weren't paid continued working on the puzzles even after the study's conclusion. The monetary award offered to the first group, Mr. Deci says, reduced the students' interest in general puzzle-solving as a way to learn for learning's sake.

"The idea that [being motivated by money] is going to magically turn into intrinsic motivation is really a pipe dream," he says.

### **More than money**

Ultrinsic says their website offers more than just cash. It opens up the power of social capital. They hope the website's competitions become a topic of conversation among students, as well as a reason to collaborate – much like exercise partners promise to hit the gym together when monthly membership fees alone don't get them out the door.

Public recognition of rewards matters just as much as the reward itself, according to Stanford University researcher Margaret Raymond.

Her studies at charter schools found that simply stringing bright lights on the door of a high-achieving classroom was enough to positively affect the effort of both students in that class and nearby classes.

Gwen Eudey, an economics professor at the University of Pennsylvania, questions whether Ultrinsic will have much effect on her "very self-motivated" students. But she doesn't object to the idea.

“It sounds amusing,” she says. “It gives a quick payback to your education.” Other professors wondered if Ultrinsic might discourage students from working together if they felt it was costing them prize money.

### **Send the right message**

The Advanced Placement Incentive Program, by contrast, does more than hand out \$100 to high-school kids who earn a passing score on college-level AP tests. It also includes salary incentives for some teachers and offers them special training from AP exam authors.

“A hundred dollars will get the kid in the door, but the training keeps the kid in the class and gives them a prayer for being successful,” says Renee McCormick, who works with the National Math and Science Foundation to oversee that preparation. “What we do behind the curtain is 10 times more important.” Because low-income students often feel neglected by the public education system, education researchers such as Tom Brock say they sometimes can’t distinguish between the value of the reward and the value of its symbolism as a good faith gesture.

Consider the Opening Doors program, run from 2004 to 2005 at two community colleges near New Orleans. Cash-strapped students with children were offered up to three potential payments: \$250 for enrolling for at least six credit hours, \$250 for maintaining at least a C average through midterm exams, and \$500 for completing the semester with the same GPA minimum.

Most participants improved both their academic performance and psychological health, including reported levels of optimism and goal-setting ability.

“It was a very positive signal coming from the outside that someone believes in them and trusts them,” says Mr. Brock, one of the study’s authors.

The creators of Ultrinsic now hope investors will trust their approach, allowing them to expand to new campuses and engineer more sophisticated rules. “We believe this is benefiting society,” Gelbart says.

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