Thriving in College: Expanding Our Vision for Student Success

Laurie A. Schreiner, PhD
Azusa Pacific University

Belmont University
January 29, 2014
How do you define student success?
Definitions of Student Success

Graduation

Academic Performance (GPA)

Learning Gains
- Critical thinking
- Analytical reasoning
- Writing skills
- Openness to Diversity

Engagement
Approaches to Student Success

- Behaviors that lead to learning outcomes
- Institutional supports for engagement
- Programs and services
- Entering student characteristics predictive of success
- Individual motivation and psychological processes that lead to engagement behaviors
Thriving

- Psychosocial
- Motivation

Attitudes

Behavior

- Engagement

Learning
- Graduation

Student Success
Positive Psychology
The Flourishing Individual
The Thriving Community
Flourishing = Emotional Vitality + Positive Functioning

Five Components of a Life Well-Lived

- Engagement
- Accomplishment
- Positive Emotions
- Positive Relationships
- Meaning

(Seligman, 2012)
## Bean and Eaton’s (2000) Model of Student Persistence

Psychological processes that promote academic and social integration and contribute to student persistence:

- Attitudes $\rightarrow$ behavior
- Coping mechanisms (approach-avoidance)
- Self-efficacy
- Locus of control/attributions
Why “Thriving”? 

Psychological well-being + academic success 

Implies more than mere survival 

Active word – vitally engaged, optimally functioning
A Shift in Perspective

FROM:

Surviving
What is not very changeable about people
Who you are and where you’ve been
Target the weakness and fix it
Failure prevention

TO:

Thriving
What can be changed
Who you can become and where you’re going
Target the talent and build on it
Success promotion
Criteria for Including a Construct

• Measurable
• Empirically connected to student success
• Malleable (state vs. trait)
• Interventions make a difference
The Thriving Quotient (TQ)

Based on existing malleable constructs predictive of student persistence and GPA

25-item instrument with responses ranging on a 6-point Likert-type scale of 1 = strongly disagree to 6 = strongly agree

Coefficient alpha = .91

Confirmatory factor analysis: five-factor model with a higher-order construct of thriving
Engaged Learning

Positive Perspective

Academic Determination

Social Connectedness

Diverse Citizenship

THRIVING
Social Connectedness

“I have made deep friendships that I know will last a long time.”
Diverse Citizenship

Want to make a difference

Think I can make a difference

Act to make a difference
“There are always ups and downs, but this place really sets you up for the ‘ups’ – it’s all what you make of it!”
### Thriving in the Classroom

#### Academic Determination
- Self-regulated learning
- Effort
- Goal-directedness (hope)
- Know how to apply their strengths to academic tasks

#### Engaged Learning
- Meaningful processing → Deep learning
- Active participation
- Focused attention
Thriving is malleable!

We can intervene to make a difference in students’ thriving levels -- and in their ultimate success.
Academic Determination

**WORK HARD**

Motivated to reach realistic goals

**SELF-REGULATED LEARNER**

Time and resource management

Know how to apply strengths to academic tasks
The question:
• What does it take to succeed?
• Do I have what it takes to succeed?

Negative answers result in
• Floundering
• Avoiding
Why Try?

• Think about a time you invested significant effort in order to excel at a task…

• What led you to invest such effort?

• Share with a neighbor!
Why Try?

- You know what it takes to succeed
- You think you have what it takes to succeed
- You care about the goal -- or it matters to people who matter to you
- You have a choice
- You aren’t in it alone – most of the time!
What Does It Take to Succeed?

• Cultural capital – some students, such as first-generation students, don’t know what it takes to succeed

• *All* persons in unfamiliar environments are unaware of what it takes to succeed in that environment
The best teaching strategies in the world have little or no effect unless one thing is addressed early in a class:

students’ sense of academic control
The First Day of Class

What do you do (or what could you do) to bolster a sense of competence and academic control the first day of class?
First Day Messages

• Let me tell you why I love to teach this class!
• Everybody struggles in new situations and unfamiliar territory (Statistics!).
• I have high expectations—but you can do this and I will help you rise to the challenge.
• There are strategies for success in this course – and it’s my job to teach them to you!
• The biggest factor in your success is the quality of the effort you put into the class.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The question:</th>
<th>Negative answers result in</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• What does it take to succeed?</td>
<td>• Floundering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Do I have what it takes to succeed?</td>
<td>• Avoiding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mindset → Role of Effort

Fixed Mindset

Intelligence is something very basic about a person that can’t be changed very much

Effort = you must not be very smart if you have to try

Growth Mindset

You can always change how intelligent you are

Effort = how you learn!
### Strategies for Encouraging a Growth Mindset

- Teach students about the brain and how it changes with practice – whatever you repeatedly focus attention on changes your brain!

- Share stories and examples of famous accomplished people who invest a lot of effort

- Emphasize the importance of practice and effort as key to the learning process (grit)

At-risk students performed better on independent tests at the end of the course – *and at the level of those not at risk* – when they had instructors who had a **growth mindset** compared to those whose instructors had a fixed mindset.
Do I have what it takes?

- High Self-Efficacy
- Approach a Task
- Persistent Effort
- Overcome Obstacles

SUCCESS
What produces self-efficacy?

- Mastery experiences
- Vicarious experiences
- Verbal persuasion
- Physiological states
- Awareness of strengths
Share with a neighbor...

What do you love about your work?
Clues to “Strengths”

Activities that you do well and that energize you are clues to your strengths

Your most fulfilling experiences likely have occurred when you were “playing to your strengths”

• Seemed to flow naturally and effortlessly
• Productive
• “I was born to do this!”
• You want to do more of this
• You invest time and energy to do it
Just think about…

What if every student could experience that same feeling on your campus?

What if students experienced that same fulfillment of being at their best while learning?
Look for what each student brings to the learning environment and communicate appreciation, respect, and trust that students are capable of learning.

Bain, K. (2004). *What the Best College Teachers Do*
Higher Education’s Track Record

• Only about half of students who start college finish with a degree

• Low-income, African-American, Native American, and Latino/a students are less than half as likely to graduate as Asian, Caucasian, and high-income students
An Increase in Diverse Learners

• 80% of the growth in new student enrollments in the next decade will come from low-income students and students of color

• Diverse learning styles and needs of students

A key advantage will be the ability to help diverse learners recognize and capitalize on the talents they bring to the learning environment
The Response of Higher Education?

• “Survival of the fittest”
• “Deficit remediation”
The Dominant Paradigm: Deficit Remediation

• There are certain skills required to be successful here

• At entrance, we need to measure students’ abilities in these key areas

• Students need to spend most of their time in their areas of weakness, in order to achieve
The Problem?

Spending most of your time in your area of weakness—while it will improve your skills, perhaps to a level of “average”—will NOT produce excellence

• This approach does NOT tap into student motivation or lead to student engagement

• The biggest challenge facing us as educators: how to engage students in the learning process
Becoming The Best Version of Yourself

Rather than sending the message that there is one path to success, a strengths-based approach encourages us to become the “best version of ourselves” in order to succeed in academics and in life.
Strength =

(Talent + Energy) x (Knowledge + Skill)
... a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied.  

--Clifton & Harter, 2003

Ways of processing information

Ways of interacting with people

Ways of seeing the world

Habits, behaviors, or beliefs that lead to greater effectiveness
Methods to Identify Talent

• **Questions to ask students:**
  - What did you learn with the greatest ease in high school?
  - What did your teachers compliment you about?
  - What do your friends say they like best about you?
  - What was your favorite assignment?
  - What subjects do you enjoy studying the most?
  - What fascinates you?
  - Tell me about a time in your life when you accomplished something you were proud of.
• Previous successes, things that seem to come naturally, learning that occurs with little effort – all are indicators of talents that can be developed into strengths
• Instruments specifically designed to measure talents
It’s all about strengths development!
How does a talent become a strength?

Talent \times Investment = \text{Strength}

Predisposition  \quad \quad \text{Requires Effort}  \quad \quad \text{Developed}

Investment is a MULTIPLIER of talent!

Investment includes time spent practicing, developing skills, & building knowledge

Louis, 2008
Engaged Learning

• Active participation (involvement)
• Focused attention (mindfulness)
• Meaningful Processing (deep learning)
What Professors Would Rather Not Know….

• while we are lecturing, students are not attending to what is being said 40% of the time

• in the first ten minutes of lecture, students retain 70% of the information; in the last ten minutes, 20%

• four months after taking an introductory psychology course, students knew only 8% more than a control group who had never taken the course

(Pollio, McKeachie)
Learning is all about Connections!

Connecting to

• You as the instructor
• Other students as fellow learners
• What else they know or have learned in other classes
• The content of the course
• Their future goals
• Their personal interests
• What is important to them or to others they care about
Motivation: The Heart of Learning

Intrinsic motivation is generated by meeting needs for:

- Competence
- Autonomy
- Relatedness

(Ryan & Deci, 2000)
Competence

Sense of being able to accomplish the designated task

- Previous successful experiences
- Optimal challenges
- Relevant and timely feedback
- Awareness of strengths

(Ryan & Deci, 2000)
Autonomy

Sense of personal volition, being able to make informed choices and take appropriate action in a given situation

• Sense of personal control in a situation
• Ability to select environments and tasks that are congruent with their talents and capabilities

(Ryan & Deci, 2000)
Examples

• Learning project proposal
• Choices in exam questions
  • Theoretical
  • Application
  • Creative design
• Bonus question – “One thing you learned that I didn’t ask on the exam”
• Feedback only – no grade
• Lottery for project due dates
Relatedness

Communities of support that value the academic task

- Relationships with significant others
- Peer interactions
- Subcultures
- Learning ethos
- Relationships with faculty

(Ryan & Deci, 2000)
What predicts thriving in college?

Sense of community on campus ($\beta = .57$)

High quality faculty interaction ($\beta = .41$)

Spirituality – especially for students of color ($\beta = .36$ to .61)

Campus involvement – but mostly for majority students and Latino/a students ($\beta = .33$)
High Quality Faculty Interaction

Mentoring

Research partnerships (Kim & Sax, 2011)

Conversations about careers

Engaging dialogue around academic issues

Refraining from personal critique (Cole, 2007)

There are racial differences in whether students benefit from interaction with faculty, however
The Thriving Campus

- Values people and brings out their best to help them reach their potential
- Puts learning at the heart of everything – and realizes that learning happens in and out of the classroom
- Is characterized by a strong sense of community and collaborative engagement across the campus
What Is One Thing You Can Do Differently?
Questions?

For more information: lschreiner@apu.edu


Schreiner, L. A. (2013). Thriving in college. In P. C. Mather and E. Hulme (Eds.), Positive psychology and appreciative inquiry in higher education (pp. 41-52). *New Directions in Student Services*, no. 143.


