What's Right with You:

Helping Students Find and Use Their Personal Strengths

Fixing what's wrong—with students, institutions, and cultures—is the most prevalent approach to change. Frank Shushok and Eileen Hulme offer the discovery and exploitation of what's right as a powerful alternative.

By Frank Shushok, Jr., and Eileen Hulme

IN *The One Thing You Need to Know About Great Managing, Great Leading and Sustained Individual Success,* Marcus Buckingham, a former senior vice president of the Gallup Organization, captures one of the central paradoxes of how we in the social sciences develop strategies for success. He notes, "You might think that social science makes a habit of studying excellence in order to learn about excellence, but it really doesn't. . . . The prevailing wisdom is that good is the opposite of bad, and so in order to understand good, one should study bad and invert the findings" (p. 16). Indeed, college and university educators frequently know more about students who have been disciplined, are retention casualties, or have performed poorly in the classroom than they do about students who have been thoroughly engaged, achieved leadership accolades, or become noted for their academic abilities. When higher education leaders reframe their thinking, interactions, and pedagogy in a way that emphasizes the positive, we believe that avenues for student learning are exploited in new and substantial ways.

Although a focus on the "bad" has been the dominant model throughout the decades since World War II, it is neither the only model nor the newest model to guide inquiry about human experience in general and student learning in particular. Prior to World War II, psychology as a field emphasized three distinct purposes: curing mental illness, assisting people in developing fulfilling and purposeful lives, and identifying and developing those of unusual talent. Historical forces have influenced which of these purposes psychologists at any given time have placed at the forefront.

In the years following World War II, the field of psychology, arguably, made its major shift toward a model of pathology, and higher education, experiencing unprecedented growth and employing increasing numbers of student life educators, was influenced by this shift. By the 1970s, the cadre of student development educators looked to emerging theories to inform their practice of working with college students. As James Earle notes, "Student development theory owes much

to the work of early psychological theorists who were concerned with life transitions and with the development of life-coping skills" (p. 614). In effect, student development educators adopted the prevailing paradigms and emphases of pioneering psychologists much like adolescents adopt the primary values of their parents. In the current era, these educators continue to keep an eye toward pathology—focusing on repairing students' problems. Typically, research on retention and student success at institutions across the country hones in on why students leave rather than why students stay. Vincent Tinto's theories on student attrition, as described in *Leaving College*, emerge from his study of Durkheim's theory of suicide. College and university educators thoughtfully consider patterns of withdrawal, create early alert systems for identifying students who are struggling, and develop courses to help those students identify areas for improvement of weaknesses. One notable exception is the Documenting Effective Educational Practices (DEEP) project, which explored how twenty high-performing institutions contributed to student success. The book on this project, *Student Success in College* by George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John Schuh, Elizabeth Whitt, and Associates, reflects a positive approach to studying strength as opposed to weakness. Chip Anderson, formerly an educator at UCLA, reflects further on this idea in the essay accompanying this article (see sidebar).

Reflect on your own conversations about students these days. Pay attention to how often you discuss what is wrong with a student, a colleague, or a situation. The truth is that American culture tends toward the pathological; we are trained to look for disease, speculate on its cause and potential consequences, and most important, remedy it. But we believe that when students learn what is right about themselves and begin to identify their strengths, they begin the process of learning how their unique attributes can be used through vocational paths and civic opportunities. The result is frequently a new energy and passion for learning—through both curricular and cocurricular activities. This learning develops over time. As Parker Palmer reminds us, "Our deepest calling is to grow into our authentic self-hood. . . . As we do so, we will not only find the joy that every human being seeks—we will also find our path of authentic service in the world" (p. 16). This is the type of learning we hope for in all students.

Happiness, Strengths, and Extraordinary Living

IN RECENT YEARS, several psychologists, including Martin Seligman and Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, have turned their field's focus—if not the broader public's attention—away from pathology and toward vitality. In *Handbook of Positive Psychology,* Seligman describes the movement toward "positive psychology" as "a change in psychology from a preoccupation only with repairing the worst things in life to also building the best qualities in life" (p. 3). He and Csikszentmihalyi put it more practically when they write, "Psychology should be able to help document what kinds of families result in children who flourish, what work settings support the greatest satisfaction among workers, what policies result in the strongest civic engagement and how people's lives can be most worth living" (p. 5).

Positive psychology does not negate the need for physiological interventions that address mental illness, but it adds a missing dimension that postulates that human strengths and potential for good should receive equal attention. The study of what is right with people illuminates aspects of the human condition that can help raise everyone's level of functioning, not just that of the mentally ill. In his book *Authentic Happiness,* Seligman asserts that well-being and happiness are not just a function of feeling good in the moment but rather that long-term life satisfaction is strongly correlated with living an engaged, meaningful, and purposeful life.

In *Authentic Happiness,* Seligman outlines what he describes as three pillars of positive psychology: the study of positive emotions (for example, confidence and hope), the study of positive traits (for example, strengths and virtues), and the study of positive institutions (for example, democracy and strong families). In short, nurturing positive emotion, identifying strengths, and fostering virtue in people and institutions leads toward a path of sustainable happiness rather than short-lived pleasure—things like material wealth and prestige that many pursue so vigorously. In *The Nicomachean Ethics,* Aristotle admonishes readers to understand and seek the good life—something quite different from the pursuit

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of pleasure. Living well and doing well, according to Aristotle, are concepts seen differently by the wise, who understand that the good or happiness is not the finding of pleasure. Rather, happiness is a "virtuous activity of the soul." Positive psychologists, like Aristotle, advocate for the pursuit of a meaningful life—one in which one's efforts contribute to a greater good, in which one's strengths and talents are employed, and in which virtue trumps utility. Strengths and virtues, according to Seligman, buffer against misfortune and build resilience. "The best therapists do not merely heal damage; they help people identify and build their strengths and their values" (*Authentic Happiness,* p. xiv).

Leading educational psychologist Howard Gardner spent ten years immersed in the study of individuals who had led extraordinary lives. Most significant among his findings was that "extraordinary individuals are distinguished less by their impressive 'raw power' than by their ability to identify their strengths and then to exploit them" (p. 15). The Gallup Organization reached a similar conclusion when it systematically studied excellence in numerous fields and levels of expertise. After thirty years and 2 million interviews with highly successful individuals, Marcus Buckingham and Don Clifton, former CEO of Gallup, suggested that highly successful individuals "identify in themselves some reoccurring patterns of behavior and then figure out a way to develop these patterns into genuine and productive strengths" (p. 24). James Critin and Richard Smith, in their book *The Five Patterns of Extraordinary Careers,* write, "Extraordinarily successful executives lead careers that fully leverage both their strengths and their passions more than six times as often as the average employee" (p. 149).

Likewise, we believe that intentionally enabling students to identify, understand, and leverage their talents, passions, and strengths allows their unique genius to emerge and sets them on a course for success. The primary goal of higher education is not merely the successful completion of college degrees. It is the formation of a generation of people that clearly understand their unique contribution and genuinely desire to use this

If We Want to Boost Retention and Achievement, We Need to Work from Student Strengths, Not Weaknesses

By Edward "Chip" Anderson

For nearly half of my professional career, I was wrong about how to help students achieve. I had the wrong focus, made inaccurate assumptions, used faulty logic, and came to the wrong conclusions about how to increase student achievement. Although a high percentage of students persisted in and graduated from the programs in which I worked, they seldom became top achievers.

Here is where and how I went wrong. I designed procedures to identify the students who were least prepared so that we could build programs and services that would help more students achieve. I assumed that there were certain levels of preparation that students needed in order to succeed; that if students met or exceeded these preparation levels, everything would take care of itself; that if students were prepared and met the expectations of their professors, then the normal courses of study and interactions with faculty would be sufficient to help students accomplish their goals.

Believing that student success depended on acquiring certain skills and knowledge, I used a combination of standardized tests, institutionally developed instruments, and interview procedures to get a clear picture of whether each student was prepared or underprepared. This was good practice in many ways, but I eventually came to see that I had structured my practice with the tenets of the Deficit Remediation Educational Model, which has been predominant in education for decades and remains the most prevalent approach in use today. This model assumes that the first and most important thing to do is to "fix" the student. Programs and services based on this model are dedicated to helping students achieve by first diagnosing student needs, problems, ignorance, concerns, defects, and deficits. Those who use the Deficit Remediation Educational Model have the challenge of designing classes, workshops, programs, and services to help students improve in areas in which they are underprepared. Based on the diagnosis, participation in remedial programs and services is often required. Students are usually prevented from pursuing other areas of study and from pursuing their interests until their "deficits" have been removed and their "problems" have been overcome. Typically, if students are unable to overcome their deficiencies by an established date, they are dismissed or told that they aren't college material.

While most educators claim to identify not only the weaknesses but also the talents and strengths of their students, in practice, most focus almost solely on the weaknesses. As a result, many students become demoralized and

uniqueness for the common good. This process starts with identity formation that may be rooted in the emergence of what Hazel Markus and Paula Nurius call the "possible self": "Possible selves are defined as the representation of individuals' ideas about what they might become, what they would like to become, and what they are afraid of becoming" (p. 954). A strengths approach shapes a student's sense of identity through the emergence of possible selves. A process of recognizing individual strengths presents potential futures that may not have been easily imagined otherwise.

Positive Psychology for the College Campus

OUR POINT is not to reject the exploration of causes of problems but to frame a discussion about how this tendency toward pathology may affect student learning, especially as it relates to how students discover meaning, purpose, and their potential influence on the world. Colleges and universities that seek to take advantage of new research offered through the positive psychology movement will engage in at least three activities. These institutions will (1) study and understand successful students on campus; (2) establish a campus ethos that facilitates students' discovery and understanding of their signature strengths; and (3) assist students in finding groups, organizations, or communities that they can serve with their signature strengths.

Study and Understand Successful Students on Campus. Traditional remediation approaches will continue to serve colleges and universities well. However, while we have engaged in remediation, we have largely neglected to ask ourselves in any serious and organized manner what it is within an individual student that creates success. We suggest that educators should spend an amount of time equivalent to that spent on remediation in the pursuit of learning about the traits, habits, and thought processes of highly successful students. Through rigorous empirical examination, we can determine which of these traits can be replicated in

disillusioned. The truth is that more students leave college because of disillusionment, discouragement, or reduced motivation than because of lack of ability or dismissal by school administration.

When I began working with underperforming students, it seemed reasonable that if I wanted to increase student persistence, I needed to study why students were leaving school and flunking out. Likewise, it seemed reasonable that to improve student achievement, I needed to study why people didn't achieve. It never occurred to me that if I wanted to produce the best insights on how to help students achieve excellence, I might be studying the wrong students. But I eventually began to realize that if you want to produce excellence, you have to study excellence. Consequently, I shifted my focus to trying to understand what made top achievers tick. Time and time again, I found that I had made inaccurate assumptions about the differences between top achievers and low achievers. For example, I had always assumed that top achievers set high goals and that low achievers set low goals. But research indicates that top achievers tend to set goals slightly above their current level of performance, whereas low achievers often set very, very high goals.

I had also assumed that top achievers possessed the strongest traditional study skills and academic competencies—the kinds of things our remedial programs were trying to teach. But I found that top achievers aren't all alike. Some are quite strong in traditional skills, but others compensate for certain inadequacies with other strengths. Also, there are huge variations in how they approach learning and studying. Some seem to learn best in isolation, while others learn best in social settings. Some learn best through group discussions, while others learn best from self-testing and repetition. There isn't any "one size fits all" set of learning and study techniques. Top achievers capitalize on their personal uniqueness as they learn. Essentially, top achievers build their academic and personal lives—and later their careers—on their talents. They develop talents into strengths and apply those strengths, and they manage their weaknesses.

What would happen if we turned our traditional retention effort on its head? If we developed programs that helped students assess their strengths and then apply those strengths to their studies? Of course, we would still assist students in improving their ability to write well or to master mathematics or to read their political science text more efficiently and critically, but all this would be in the context of helping them identify, further develop, and apply what they can already do well. In my experience, this approach is tremendously motivating, contributes to a sense of agency, and helps young people stay in college.

The late ***Chip Anderson*** directed retention programs at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and UCLA Extension and was a member of the education faculty at UCLA and Azusa Pacific University. As a senior scientist with the Gallup Organization from 2002 to 2005, he helped colleges and universities design strengths-based programs.

all students through proven interventions.

The promotion of success begins with the study of success. George Vallant's book, *Aging Well,* reports on his analysis of human development with an eye toward understanding those who reach their later years of life feeling fulfilled. Likewise, Laurent Parks Daloz and his colleagues' book *Common Fire* examines the lives of one hundred people who sustained long-term commitment to the common good in the face of overwhelming odds. Colleges and universities can take the lead of such authors and move away from a disposition toward studying the least successful to a focus on understanding students who are fulfilled, accomplished, and, most important, learning. Two notable examples of this type of work are provided by George Kuh and his colleagues in *Involving Colleges* and in *Student Success in College.*

Establish an Ethos That Facilitates Students' Discovery of Their Signature Strengths. To facilitate student understanding of their signature strengths, educators should first be aware of their own personal strengths and how they have used them to create success. Students scrutinize the lives of influential people around them, who may or may not understand their own identity. Role models who understand their strengths can help dispel myths that anyone can be competent at anything and that the greatest room for growth is in the areas of greatest weakness. Parker Palmer writes, "Before you tell your life what you intend to do with it, listen for what it intends to do with you" (p. 3). Students who watch faculty, staff, and alumni model this philosophy may be inspired to explore what their life intends to do with them.

Colleges and universities should also be intentional about providing mechanisms through which students can identify their strengths. The Gallup Organization's StrengthsQuest program, for example, has been adapted to demonstrate what impact individual strengths have on learning and the socialization process. The researchers who developed the instrument used in the program sought to understand excellence in individuals in myriad professions. From more than two million interviews that the Gallup Organization conducted with high-achieving individuals, thirty-four themes representing a wide range of human strengths emerged. The themes fall into four domains: striving, relating, thinking, and impacting. Themes such as input, ideation, and command provide college students with language with which to explore their unique strengths. The student with the strength of input, for example, will discover that an inquisitive nature and a propensity to collect things are part of what makes them valuable to others. The strength of ideation describes a person who is fascinated by ideas. A student who in the past might have been labeled bossy may, in actuality, be gifted with the strength of command—the uncanny ability to take a stance and move people to take action. Instead of thinking of themselves as "pack rats," "dreamers," or "drill sergeants," students may begin to understand how the attributes associated with these labels are strengths that can play a role in a diverse community. Each student who completes the forty-minute online StrengthsQuest inventory is provided with a report that shows his or her top five strengths. This is one of several instruments that can provide students with a method for understanding their strengths and the strengths of others.

Texas Christian University, Baylor University, and Azusa Pacific University are examples of institutions that conduct strengths assessments during the orientation of every entering student. Students are introduced to programs and resources that emphasize the importance of using their particular strengths to achieve excellence in college. Each signature strength that a student identifies can lead her or him to succeed in the college environment in a unique manner. For example, students with the strength of input have a drive to collect information from a wide variety of sources when preparing papers. The breadth of information they collect gives them the opportunity to write excellent papers. However, if students with the strength of input do not manage this ability, they may have difficulty starting their papers because of their drive to collect just one more nugget of information.

Baylor University also provides incoming students with access to online information on how particular strengths play out in a roommate situation. Students with the strength of communication often enjoy a great deal of verbal discourse. They are motivated to guarantee that they are clear in their communication and that the listener understands their intended message. However, students with the strength of intellection enjoy processing information internally. They can spend hours sitting quietly, thinking about ideas. A student with the strength of intellection and a student with a signature strength of communication who are attempting to negotiate a successful living arrangement will need to learn to understand and appreciate how their strengths can be used to complement each other rather than cause irritation. Baylor attempts to help students reframe relationships in a manner that creates a deeper understanding of human interdependence and complementary strengths.

Texas A&M University uses a strengths approach in advising student organizations. Students are encouraged to understand how their strengths define their leadership style and how to successfully motivate and manage others through employing the individual strengths and passions of others. For example, students with strategic

strength will be gifted in helping their student organizations develop plans for activities. As student leaders begin to understand the motivational force that individual strengths provide, they are able to create more successful organizations.

Students who identify their signature strengths come to realize that they cannot be all things to all people. They also realize that others possess strengths that when coupled with their own gifts create a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Robert Greenleaf expresses this concept when he notes, "Many people finding their wholeness through many and varied contributions make a good society" (p. 45).

We believe that recognition of one's own and others' strengths begins a process of understanding that a life well lived is one lived in interdependence and community. Through identification of strengths, a person can acknowledge his or her own strengths and understand that he or she needs others with complementary strengths. This approach allows educators to prepare students to become members of an engaged community in the midst of an increasingly individualized and competitive Western society. It can provide institutions with a new way to emphasize the importance of diversity. In a time when the term *diversity* evokes a range of strong emotions, focusing on strengths offers a safe and less emotionally charged entry into a discussion. A focus on strengths rather than differences can be used in the context of discussions on race, ethnicity, and any number of other human differences. A focus on strengths may also serve as a vehicle for reestablishing a sense of community, which Greenleaf calls "the lost knowledge of these times" (p. 37).

Adherents of strengths development do not believe that this method teaches students to take a naïve, complacent approach to life. In fact, developing a person's strengths is a difficult, lifelong process. It is a matter of emphasis. Individuals can choose to work on weaknesses, which, we believe, can produce only small incremental levels of growth. Or they can spend equal amounts of time, hard work, and discipline developing strengths and, as a result, experience significant growth. The latter, we suggest, is the path toward more powerful living. In addition, taking a strengths approach will allow personal strengths to overcome weaknesses. The alternative is to work continually to overcome weaknesses. A strengths approach is not naïve, it is selecting a focus.

Developing an ethos of strengths development requires a review of campus practices, programs, and services and a challenge to existing assumptions about student learning and development. Several institutional practices will require reconsideration if a shift toward strengths development is made. Is allowing or encouraging students to take advanced placement tests in order to bypass classes in subjects in which they exhibit great strength (and placing them in classes in subjects in which they do not exhibit the same promise) the appropriate practice? Does using assessment instruments that provide risk analysis for incoming students but not employing a parallel tool for analysis of strengths create a weakness mentality? Again, we are not suggesting that long-held assumptions about retention and learning should be abandoned. Considering strengths development simply asks for a reevaluation of current practices in order to afford students the opportunity to identify and develop their innate strengths to reveal personal capacities.

Assist Students in Discovering Positive Organizations to Belong to. Helping students discover and understand their signature strengths should be followed by working with students to use those strengths toward achievement of the common good. Both societal and personal goals are best reached by taking steps to both identify and use personal strengths.

It is all too common for students to know their strengths but pursue careers that are neither personally fulfilling nor a forum for expressing their unique talents. Students often make such choices to satisfy parental pressure, monetary aspirations, or to remain congruent with societal role expectations (men who choose not to pursue nursing or elementary school teaching, for example). Student development theories suggest that students conform to external expectations because they do not reflect on their choices and use that reflection to make decisions toward constructing an internal sense of identity. Parker Palmer suggests that in order to let life speak, individuals need the courage to resist social systems that prevent them from living untrue lives. This self focus, as Palmer describes, often has an altruistic outcome. He writes, "Anytime we can listen to true self and give it the care it requires, we do so not only for ourselves but for the many others whose lives we touch" (p. 31). An important educative task is to help students discover how social systems can conspire against a strengths-service match. Engaging students in reflection in order to establish their internal beliefs and identity is a crucial part of this process.

Once students have been introduced to their personal strengths, the important next step is to expose them to groups and communities in which these strengths can best be expressed. Robert Putnam in his groundbreaking book *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community,* argues that social bonds are the most powerful predictor of life satisfaction. He further notes that environments with weak social ties have lower edu-

cational performance. A dearth of communal activity threatens civic and personal health. While some predicted that the past few years of terrorist action and ongoing threat against the United States would promote a more engaged populace, Lawrence Kaplan notes that five years after the events of September 11, 2001, most individuals are still doing the equivalent of bowling alone.

Colleges and universities are positioned to help. Students who have been helped to identify their personal strengths can be introduced to the thousands of organizations, institutions, coalitions, and communities that exist to work for the common good. In his work with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Martin Seligman asserts that using one's giftedness for the betterment of an organization allows individuals to live better, more fulfilled lives and produces positive effects for society as a whole. As Thomas Jeavons notes in *Learning for the Common Good,* "It is vital that those who receive a college education feel empowered to act on their knowledge—and that they know how to move from knowing to acting. . . . This is essential if they are to be constructive and creative contributors to the common good of their communities" (p. 25). Students can be encouraged to take action by participating in community service, and faculty can be encouraged to design courses with a strong service learning component. As students identify and work with local organizations or groups, interact with civic-minded individuals, and engage in ongoing reflection, they gain a better understanding of how to use their strengths to benefit others as well as hands-on experience in doing so.

Future Strength

EDUCATORS, particularly those who work with students outside the classroom, are trained to identify and correct problems. This approach typically addresses gaps in skills but does not identify and exploit personal strengths. We argue that institutions and the students who attend them would be better served by redistributing their efforts in order to seek out primarily what is right about students and then help students nurture those talents.

Policies, programs, and budget allocation systems currently focus on helping people change. Colleges and universities are especially adept at studying the most unsuccessful in an effort to help them become more successful. That approach has merit, but should be accompanied by more deliberate actions that help students discover their signature strengths and find a community in which to use them. Because the Western cultural norm typically works against this approach, colleges and universities may find that making this shift is challenging. The alternative, however, is to risk graduating students who have the potential to help make profound societal changes but don't live their lives doing so.

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