Increasing Postsecondary Retention and Graduation Through Strengths-Based Education

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Abstract— **If more educational institutions embrace strengths-based education and identify students' strengths in the early semesters of postsecondary education, students may be inspired to capitalize on their strengths and maximize potential in college. Educational stakeholders can also engage those student strengths in teaching and learning for educational benefit. With an aim of increased postsecondary graduation rates, revisiting strengths-based education provides possibilities for retaining students and meeting new graduation goals.**

Keywords— **Community College, Graduation, Postsecondary Education, Retention, Strengths, Strengths-based Education**

I. INTRODUCTION

In 1993 when Tinto noted that "[m]ore students leave their college or university prior to degree completion than stay" [1:1], academic surprise was mild. When in 2014, the statement is still true in the United States [2], the reaction is shocking, and one finds local, state, and national governing bodies applying intense pressure to improve America's higher education situation.

In 2009 President Obama addressed the United States Congress, providing a rationale and plan to increase the number of college graduates. In stating that the United States now ranks 16th of industrialized nations in completion rates for 25- to 34-year olds and half of students enrolling in higher education never finish, Obama pointed out that "[t]his is a prescription for economic decline, because we know the countries that out-teach us today will out-compete us tomorrow" [3:¶61-62]. The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), the largest professional organization of community colleges in the 50 states, described the graduation situation as critical. Their assessment reminded Americans that "[b]y 2018, nearly two thirds of all American jobs will require a postsecondary certificate or degree . . . [moreover,] recent analyses indicate that the United States has been under-producing graduates with postsecondary skills since at least 1980 . . . " [4:viii]. In this context, the President promised support to postsecondary education to meet his goal of increased college graduation emphasizing that "America

will once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world" [3:¶62].

In the United States, community colleges are the largest postsecondary education provider. With 1,132 colleges and 12.8 million students enrolled in credit and noncredit courses in 2012 [5], this educational venue is well known for providing open access to higher education. Now, the most pressing challenge for the community colleges is not only providing access but graduating those students that attend.

II. BACKGROUND

Goldrick-Rab [6] reported that as high as 90% of U.S. high school students indicated that they expect to attend college. More recently, the American College Test (ACT) organization stated that 87% of ACT-tested high school graduates aspire to attain at least a two-year degree [7]. However, the degree completion rates continue to remain low, with the consistent message that students enrolled in postsecondary education have inadequate academic preparation and thus their poor college readiness impacts their success in higher education.

Student retention initiatives and programs have been implemented within many U.S. community colleges. These efforts entail well-known, early intervention strategies targeting first-year students with information, advising, and support [8] and requiring success or orientation courses or programs [9] [10] [11]. Accordingly, the importance of student engagement can be found in an extensive body of research. As Tinto succinctly said: "Simply put involvement matters, especially during the first year of college . . . the more students are academically and socially involved, the more likely they are to persist and graduate" [8:6].

Community colleges have utilized the Community College Survey of Student Engagement (CCSSE) [12], [13] to measure student engagement both in and outside of the classroom. While no single model for student retention and successful completion is applied across community college institutions, a synopsis of the literature points to multiple strategies and programs that can enhance retention and completion rates. Most strategies have involved collecting and analyzing student demographics and have focused on providing academic information, study skills, counseling, mentoring, and other institutional support mechanisms and systems to incoming freshmen [14], [15], [16], [17]. These institutional strategies have been viewed as collective efforts to retain students and, equally important, improve the graduation rate.

III. STRENGTHS PSYCHOLOGY

While group retention efforts have merit, the focus has been on the weaknesses of students. The Gallup Organization reported that when individuals worldwide focus on correcting *weakness* only mediocre performance results. Yet, when comparable effort is targeted to improve, foster, and promote personal strengths or talent, increased levels of performance, even excellence, can be achieved [18]. This philosophy of strengths stands in stark contrast to more traditional and historical goals for behavior improvement – that of remediating weakness [19].

Positive personality traits of humans have been studied from several perspectives. The movement of strengths research, called positive psychology, emanated from psychological research which emphasized positive attributes, a change from a psychological philosophy of treating dysfunction [20], [21]. Strengths psychology, an extension of positive psychology, has roots in two areas of scholarship: virtues and human talent. Peterson and Seligman [22], pioneers in the field of positive psychology, based their thesis of strengths psychology on a foundation of human character as it relates to human virtues. Peterson and Seligman did not arbitrarily choose these virtues but found that virtues appeared to transcend through human character over time. Individual strengths from their viewpoint defined individual virtues.

As early as 1925, Hurlock's seminal work stressed positive praise instead of criticism and revealed positive outcomes when positive praise was implemented in an educational setting [23]. Though embracing students' positive qualities is not the norm in public education, the concept is not new. Strengths programs continue to gain interest because positive outcomes result. By focusing on what is innately right within each student, a major step toward identification and development of a student's strengths can ensue. With strengths development, the common practice of remediating a student's weaknesses is not as prominent, thus building a culture of individual accomplishment and increased productivity.

Strengths development has been applied within community colleges. Instead of focusing on student demographics or student weaknesses (e.g., low test scores and GPAs) of entering community college students, a movement to utilize student talents or strengths in courses, programs, and other educational activities gained attention. Broderson commented, "[T]alent is the greatest asset held by an individual and that such talent is often unidentified, yet is available within individuals to be developed and leveraged" [24:21]. By focusing on students' strengths and development of these strengths, institutions can create frameworks for working with human talent.

IV. STRENGTHS-BASED EDUCATION

In practical terms, attention has not emphasized the positive, that is, what is right with an individual and what is innately beneficial for each student. Educators have unknowingly ignored innate factors of success and undiscovered talents and strengths. According to Anderson, [25], much of the structure of the educational system in the United States is based on the "deficit-remediation model," an approach which helps students improve in areas where they are underprepared. Unfortunately, this "deficit-remediation model" largely exists today, resulting in objectives to fix what is wrong with students not able to pursue interests or expand talents until deficits have improved.

Based on a span of 30 years of research on human strengths, Marcus Buckingham and Donald Clifton [26] identified and categorized intrinsic strengths into 34 specific talent themes (e.g., adaptability, connectedness, consistency, futuristic, harmony, maximizer, restorative). Each themed talent could be considered strength-prevalent in humans. "Because talents are naturally recurring patterns, they are 'automatic,' almost like breathing, so they repeatedly help you achieve" [26:6]. A strengths-based education program builds on these themes of talents in order to improve strengths of each student.

To date, much of the emphasis for increasing higher education success has focused on implementing different learning tools or modifying the classroom to accommodate needs or weaknesses. When educators implemented strengths-based education in classrooms by helping students discover and develop their talents, successful outcomes were achieved [27], [28]. Researchers found that the development of human strengths can have "positive impacts on the desired academic behavior of students" [27:106] and that strengths-development programs in schools led to greater self-confidence, which in turn led to greater academic efficacy [28]. Researchers also determined that student persistence increased when strengths development was employed in the classroom [28]. More recently, a statistically significant relationship was found between students' intrinsic strengths and successful completion of online and face-to-face college courses [29]. Furthermore, there was improved academic performance in the first semester when high-risk college students used a strengths assessment instrument [30].

The classroom is not the only part of education where strengths application may have a positive influence. Studies have pointed out success with strengths identification and development in academic advising and counseling to first-year students [24], [31]. When strengths-based advising was implemented, freshman students had a statistically significant higher persistence to the second semester and registration for the second year [32]. Then, too, students learned to see themselves differently, with greater confidence, when strengths were included in the advising process--enabling students to visualize success and a life where they could fully develop and apply their talents [31], [33].

In a strengths-based educational setting, sharing strengths among classmates contributed to an overall feeling of engagement [34]. Focusing on each other's strengths helped students identify and more clearly appreciate the uniqueness and positive potential of each individual [34]. "[W]hen students learn about their strengths, they are given a new language and a new confidence with which to begin writing the story of their life" [28:129]. Greater self-confidence, greater academic efficacy, positive academic behaviors, and extrinsic motivation were found when students identified and fostered growth of their own intrinsic strengths [27]. In this context, research supported the thesis that when strengths were identified and developed, positive outcomes were resultant.

Numerous questions remain on strengths identification and the fostering of strengths in the educational setting. Moreover, given the notion that human talent and strengths exist, what particular strengths define student success in the university classroom? Limited research has linked student strengths to successful completion of courses or graduation from postsecondary institutions.

However, if recognition and development of human talent and strengths can increase positive learning behavior of students, what about students whose talents and strengths have not been recognized? Do certain human strengths lend themselves toward success in a college classroom even if they have not been recognized? Can identification of these strengths improve retention and persistence? What if certain strengths are indicative of success in a university classroom and a student does not possess those strengths? Can students who lack specific strengths be targeted by the instructor in order to decrease attrition? Or, can these students be advised to enroll in classes that more directly correlate to their strengths? Questions about strengths in relationship to retention and graduation from postsecondary education remain, but now may be the time to discover and examine strengths-based education.

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