

*Instead of focusing on what students lack, higher education should build on what they do well. Laurie Schreiner introduces an assessment tool that measures the complex factors that affect student success and makes practical suggestions for improving students' college experience.*

*By Laurie A. Schreiner*

# THE “THRIVING QUOTIENT”

## A New Vision for Student Success

**I**T'S GRADUATION DAY. As I sit in the faculty section and watch students cross the stage to receive their diplomas, Angela and Carla capture my attention. Both were psychology majors who had entered the university with the “at risk” label, by virtue of their inadequate high school preparation and less-than-desirable SAT scores. Both were first-generation Latinas from low-income, single-parent families. And now both were considered “successes”—they had graduated.

Yet I felt there was a distinct qualitative difference between these two young women. Angela was eagerly anticipating her new job with a local domestic violence shelter, a result of service-learning experiences that had begun in her first-year seminar. Carla hadn't yet settled on a job after graduation. Angela had gotten involved in the choir on campus after her peer leader in orientation discovered she had a passion for singing and introduced her to other choir members. Carla participated occasionally in campus events but appeared to spend her time on the margins of the college experience, not

fully engaged in all that the university had to offer. I remembered Angela as a highly engaged learner in my classes. In contrast, I remembered Carla as the kind of student who usually attended class but was mostly “invisible.”

Despite different outcomes, Angela and Carla had started out much the same way—uncertain of how to navigate the waters of the university system when no one from their family had ever attended college. Both had been concerned about how to juggle the jobs they needed to pay tuition with all the other demands of college life, and both were unsure whether they had what it would take to succeed in college. Yet the similarity of their journeys through college and the extent to which they had made the most of their college experience ended there, despite the fact that both had graduated. So how were their experiences different?

Carla had remained unsure of herself and her abilities, while Angela's view of herself had changed. Carla's concern about juggling work and school had resulted in a lack of involvement in any campus organizations,

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whereas Angela's concerns had been alleviated when her peer leader in orientation shared her story and encouraged the students in her group to connect their life passions with meaningful involvement on campus. Carla's lack of knowledge about how to navigate the college environment multiplied her uncertainties about herself and led her to disengage from events that became too challenging, while Angela's uncertainties had been directly addressed in her first-year seminar class and by an advisor who emphasized to her the unique talents and assets she brought to the college environment and connected her to resources on campus.

As I thought about Angela and Carla and how qualitatively different their college experiences had been, as well as how different their lives might be after graduation, I realized that although both would be considered a success among higher education experts, Angela had thrived in college while Carla had merely survived. Although both had begun as at-risk students on campus, Angela had made the most of her college experiences and had developed a rich and full life in which she was already making a contribution to the world around her. In contrast, Carla had gone through college almost on autopilot—meeting requirements, doing what was necessary to get the grade, and dabbling in a few campus organizations in between her work schedule, but not fully invested in her learning experiences in or out of class.

This qualitative difference in the “success” of college students raises a question of how we envision student success. Although in *Student Success in College*, George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John H. Schuh, Elizabeth J. Whitt define student success broadly as “satisfaction, persistence, and high levels of learning and personal

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development” (p. xiv), the reality is that we tend to measure student success primarily in terms of academic performance and persistence to graduation. Yet most of us who have worked extensively with students know that there is more to a successful college experience than grades and graduation.

Why had Angela thrived and Carla merely survived? And, more important, was thriving something that we could encourage in a student—was it changeable, or was it something that was deeply ingrained within the student's personality traits?

This article is the first in a three-part series that describes the major findings from a national study of college-student thriving conducted over the past three years with my team of doctoral students at Azusa Pacific University. In this first article, I describe the study itself and how the data were collected and analyzed, along with the major features of our newly developed instrument, the Thriving Quotient. I share the findings related to students' psychological perspectives and attitudes that are foundational to thriving, along with their implications for future research and practice in higher education. In the second part of the series, I will focus on academic thriving and the implications of the research for both faculty and student life professionals. In the third part of the series, I will explore the interpersonal aspects of thriving and describe the aspects of social connectedness and making a contribution that exist within students who are thriving. Specific suggestions for interventions that will build levels of thriving within students will be highlighted in each part of the series.

## DEFINING THRIVING

**O**UR DEFINITION OF THRIVING was derived from existing measures and perspectives of psychological well-being and student success, as well as from successful students' perceptions and experiences as described to us in interviews and focus groups. The field of positive psychology, with its emphasis on empirical research about what leads to positive individual and community functioning, provided a framework for exploring the difference between students who thrive in college compared to those who merely survive.

One of the key concepts to emerge within positive psychology is *flourishing*, which Corey Keyes and Jon Haidt describe as a life lived with high levels of emotional, psychological, and social well-being. Flourishing individuals have an enthusiasm for life, are productively engaged with others and in society, and are resilient in the face of personal challenges. However, flourishing has been studied primarily in young children or older adults and thus does not contain an academic component that is crucial to college-student success, so my team decided to use the term *thriving* to describe the experiences of college students who are fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Thriving college students not only are academically successful, they also experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that contributes to their persistence to graduation and allows them to gain maximum benefit from being in college. As one student described in an interview, “personally, it’s when I wake up and I’m ready for the next day and I love this and I know I’m doing something important and fulfilling . . . but I know it’s not all about me; it’s about others, too.”

The concept of thriving is not only linked to models of psychological well-being, but is also linked to models of student retention in higher education. John Bean and Shawn Eaton’s psychological model of retention emphasizes the psychological processes in which students engage as they experience college life, processes that develop a sense of academic and social integration leading to institutional fit, retention, and graduation. John Braxton and colleagues Amy Hirschy and Shederick McClendon also focus on psychological processes in their persistence models that include communal potential, proactive social adjustment, and psychosocial engagement. An examination of the psychological processes outlined in these models indicates that it may be useful to connect those processes theoretically to the construct of flourishing that has been well researched in psychology.

## THE THRIVING QUOTIENT

After combining these interdisciplinary perspectives on well-being and student success with the descriptions from successful college students, we developed an instrument to reliably measure thriving. Pilot testing, revising, and performing factor analysis resulted in a survey instrument with 35 items that clustered on five factors, a model that produced an excellent fit of the data and demonstrated high reliability. Our analyses indicated that thriving was indeed a distinct construct comprised of (1) engaged learning, (2) academic determination, (3) positive perspective, (4) diverse citizenship, and (5) social connectedness. Each of the factors represents an element of academic, intrapersonal, or interpersonal thriving that has been empirically demonstrated to be amenable to change within students, rather than a fixed personality trait over which we have little control.

**Academic Thriving.** Academic thriving is characterized by engaged learning and academic determination. Students who are thriving academically are psychologically engaged in the learning process, not merely engaged in behaviors. Showing up for class and reading the assignment does not equate to psychological engagement in learning. Engaged learning occurs when students are meaningfully processing the material, making connections between what they already know or are interested in and what needs to be learned. They are focused and attentive to new learning opportunities and actively think about and discuss with others what they are learning. In short, they are energized by the learning process.

The second academic component of thriving is academic determination, which is characterized by an investment of effort, an ability to manage one’s time and the multiple academic and personal demands of the college environment, a motivation to succeed, and the intentional pursuit of one’s goals. Students who thrive academically know that it is the investment of effort on a

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regular basis that will help them succeed. They are motivated to do well, they have educational goals that are important to them, and they have strategies for reaching those goals. When things get tough—classes are boring, the reading assignment is hard, the material is confusing—they don't give up; they try new strategies, they ask for help, and they stick with it until they finish.

**Intrapersonal Thriving.** Thriving in college requires the development of healthy attitudes toward self as well as toward the learning process. Intrapersonal thriving is composed of a factor we called *positive perspective*. Students who thrive have a positive outlook on life, an optimistic way of viewing the world and their future. As a result, they tend to be more satisfied with their lives and enjoy the college experience more. This perspective is not a naïve worldview that expects everything to turn out okay, nor is it an overly optimistic view of self that is unrealistic or arrogant. Rather, a positive perspective is a way of viewing reality and proactively coping with it. Students with a positive perspective have a broader and more long-term view of events that happen to them. As a result, they are less likely to overreact and therefore handle stress better; they can put things in perspective and reframe negative events to find some positive benefit or learning opportunity. Seeing the glass as half-full enables them to experience more positive emotions on a regular basis, which leads to higher levels of satisfaction with the college experience.

**Interpersonal Thriving.** Thriving is incomplete without relationships. In our interviews with students, all of them reported that they would not consider themselves to be thriving unless they had meaningful connections with other people. There are two aspects to interpersonal thriving in our measure. The first is the social connections themselves: having friends, being in relationships with others who listen, and experiencing a sense of community within the college environment. But the second component, which we have labeled *diverse citizenship*, is a complex combination of an openness and valuing of differences in others, an interest in relating to others from diverse backgrounds, a desire to

make a contribution in the world and the confidence to do so, and what psychologist Carol Dweck calls a “growth mindset”—the belief that change is possible with effort. This complex combination of variables is reflected in students who give time to help others, get involved in organizations where they are likely to encounter people who are different from themselves, and respond to others with openness and curiosity, believing that the other has something important to contribute to the relationship.

Together, these three domains of thriving represent areas of student functioning that are amenable to change. Students bring into the college environment personality predispositions, behavioral tendencies, life experiences, and ways of seeing the world that often appear to be fixed. Yet in choosing to define and measure thriving with constructs that other researchers had empirically demonstrated were malleable, this tool provides a method for colleges and universities to measure student development holistically and suggests specific mechanisms for increasing the benefits students receive from the college experience.

### THE CONNECTION BETWEEN THRIVING AND STUDENT-SUCCESS OUTCOMES

Our initial goal was to create a holistic measure of positive student functioning that was reliable, valid, and connected to important outcomes in higher education. Our ultimate goal was to design interventions that enable a greater percentage of college students to thrive during their college years and beyond, so that more students are able to derive full benefit from their investment of time, energy, and money into a college education. In order to accomplish that goal, we needed to determine the extent to which the five scales of the Thriving Quotient predicted important student-success outcomes. Our question was, “What does knowing a student’s level of thriving *add* to our understanding of the variation in their success, over and above the traditional predictors of gender, ethnicity, generation status, high school grades, and admis-

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sion test scores?” After controlling for these factors, as well as for key features of the institutions these students attended, we found that the five elements of thriving explained an additional 8 to 18 percent of the variation in such outcomes as college grades, intent to graduate, self-reported learning gains, and institutional fit. This finding indicates that there is a significant piece of the student–success puzzle that can be understood by focusing on the concept of thriving.

Interestingly, differences in students’ backgrounds before entering college were not as important to understanding their success as was their level of thriving. Students who were engaged and investing effort in the learning experience, who were connected in meaningful ways to others and believed they were making a difference, and who had a positive outlook on life were significantly more likely to achieve higher grades and greater learning gains from the college experience. They also reported significantly higher levels of institutional fit and the intention to graduate from that institution, regardless of their ethnicity, gender, academic ability, or the type of institution they attended. Given the disparate graduation rates across ethnic groups, this finding is good news indeed, as it indicates that we may be able to increase students’ likelihood of success by designing interventions that enable them to thrive in college.

### POSITIVE PERSPECTIVE: THE FOUNDATION OF THRIVING

**F**OUNDATIONAL TO THRIVING in college is the outlook on life that students hold. Thriving college students have a positive perspective on life, what psychologists call an “optimistic explanatory style.” Rather than an unrealistically positive view of the world, this perspective actually enables a person to come to grips with difficult situations more readily. It is not just feeling good about one’s life, but is a way of perceiving events and the type of strategies one uses to cope with difficulties. In a nutshell, *students with a positive perspective keep trying*; even when progress is slow or difficult,

they remain confident of their ability to achieve the final outcome and therefore persist in the face of challenges. These students tend to take the long view of events, to see the bigger picture, to notice and remember the positives in others and in their environment, and to expect good things to occur in life. “They are less distressed when times are tough, they cope in ways that foster better outcomes, and they’re better at taking the steps necessary to ensure that their futures continue to be bright,” note researchers Charles Carver, Michael Scheier, Christopher Miller, and Daniel Fulford (p. 308).

The coping strategies that distinguish this optimistic explanatory style can be characterized as proactive and problem-focused, rather than reactive and avoidant. Those with a positive perspective take the initiative—they seek out information, take steps to ensure their success, reframe negative events so they see others’ perspectives or can find something to be learned from the experience, use humor effectively to cope, and are quick to accept the reality of their situation. When they fail, they tell themselves it’s a temporary setback and they look for what they can do differently next time to succeed. As a result of this outlook on life and its accompanying coping strategies, they experience more positive emotions and a higher level of satisfaction with their lives—as well as greater levels of success. Indirectly, this perspective leads to more effective problem solving, stronger relationships, and a more enjoyable college experience.

The optimistic outlook that characterizes thriving students is associated with a greater ability to develop long-term plans and goals, to envision a specific positive future, and to take the necessary steps to achieve their goals. The experience of positive emotions that accompanies the optimistic outlook actually broadens students’ cognitive attention; their thinking becomes more open and flexible, more creative and receptive to new information, and more capable of critical problem solving. These positive emotions affect students’ interactions with others, as well; they become more attuned

to others' needs, more likely to help others, less likely to focus on differences between people, and less racially biased. They also are more resilient—they bounce back from adversity and recover faster from illness and stressful events.

This positive perspective on life is not merely a function of one's personality. Although some people seem naturally cheerful and optimistic and others appear to have seen the glass as half-empty from birth, that's only a small part of the story. Psychologists are discovering that optimism can be learned; this positive perspective on life is something that can be taught to students so they can thrive in college.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: STRATEGIES FOR CHANGING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES

**C**HANGING STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES on their circumstances and their outlook for the future may sound like a labor-intensive, long-term project, but there is empirical evidence that even relatively brief interventions can have lasting and significant effects. For instance, Raymond Perry, Nathan Hall, and Joelle Ruthig have demonstrated that an eight-minute video followed by a brief writing exercise significantly impacts at-risk students' explanatory style. This "attributional retraining" is but one example of how we can design effective interventions to increase the level of thriving among our students. There are three specific practices supported by current research that can have a lasting effect on college students: (1) equipping students with an optimistic explanatory style, (2) helping students envision future success, and (3) teaching students to develop and apply their strengths. Faculty and student life professionals alike can engage in these practices with students in and out of the classroom.

**Equipping Students with an Optimistic Explanatory Style.** How students explain the setbacks and failures that are an inevitable part of life affects their likelihood of recovering more quickly from such events, as well as their ability to approach future challenges. Psychologist Martin Seligman, in his

book *Learned Optimism*, describes a healthy explanatory style as one that is optimistic—failures are attributed to controllable causes and are viewed as unique to the event rather than global in nature. For example, a student with an optimistic explanatory style who gets a lower grade than expected on a math exam would be more likely to attribute his or her poor performance to not working enough practice problems, not studying the right way for this particular exam, or not asking enough questions in class last week when the professor wasn't being clear, whereas a student with a pessimistic explanatory style would have more global and stable attributions. He or she would more likely attribute poor performance to not being smart enough, not understanding anything in the class, or being "no good at math."

Fortunately, attributional style is changeable. The Penn Resilience Program has experienced significant success in their 12-week intervention teaching middle and high school students about an optimistic explanatory style, and they are currently testing an online version of the program. Raymond Perry and his associates at the University of Manitoba have consistently demonstrated that a short attributional retraining video, followed by a writing exercise that consolidates what students have learned from the video, significantly changes college students' sense of academic control and subsequent investment of effort, leading to higher academic performance. As students realize the psychological processes that impact their success, they are provided with a road map that normalizes the journey and gives them a sense of control over it. It is only when this internal process occurs that students can begin to benefit from some of the concrete skills assistance provided on most of our campuses.

Equipping students with an optimistic explanatory style is particularly important with first-year students, who are in a new and unfamiliar environment and may be feeling they have little control. Effective ways of encouraging a positive perspective in students include providing peer leaders as role models who specifically address this issue in orientation and the first-year seminar, capitalizing on the advising relationship in order

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to teach students specific ways to interpret events that happen to them, and incorporating a brief lesson on attributional style as part of the first day of each class. Peer leaders can be a powerful force in affecting the perspective of new students. When peer leaders explain to the first-year class how they used to view life and the mistakes they made in their first year, then go on to describe how their view changed and what actions they've taken to be more successful in college, they model to students that effort and strategy make a difference. An advisor can turn a discussion of low grades or personal crisis into an opportunity to teach the student to reframe the situation and strategize for success the next time. On the first day of class, in the process of discussing the syllabus and overview of the course, an instructor can include a brief discussion of what it takes to succeed in the class, highlighting that there are specific strategies that work and that the attributions students make throughout the course will also affect their success. Incorporating tools to have these discussions with students into faculty development, advisor training, orientation planning, and student leadership development programs will equip advisors, classroom instructors, and peer leaders so that they can impact students' perspective on the college experience.

**Helping Students Envision Future Success.** Students with a positive perspective are able to envision a bright future for themselves, and this image serves to motivate them to persevere when the going gets tough. Hazel Markus and Paul Nurius at Stanford University have designed interventions around this concept of “the possible self,” and psychologists have demonstrated that visualizing one’s “best possible self” leads to more positive emotions and taking actions to reach one’s goals. In the college environment, the advising relationship provides an ideal opportunity for helping students envision their future success in specific ways, while also equipping them with strategies for making their vision a reality. This envisioning process can also occur in the career center, in mentoring relationships with faculty and student life professionals, in peer relationships, and as part of the curriculum of a first-year seminar. Studies have shown that this process can occur effectively online, or as a writing exercise outside of class, in one-on-one conversations, or in small group discussions. The key is to encourage

students to describe themselves at their best and to vividly picture being successful at a goal that is important to them. When this vivid and concrete image is firmly in place, along with specific strategies to realize that future, it becomes a motivating force: people confident about an eventual outcome that is meaningful to them will persevere even in the face of significant challenges.

**Teaching Students to Develop and Apply Their Strengths.** As Frank Shushok and Eileen Hulme noted in an *About Campus* article in 2006, one of the major contributions of positive psychology to the field of higher education is the emphasis placed on building on one’s strengths to address the challenges of life. Barbara Fredrickson echoes this point in her book *Positivity* when she states that “people who have the opportunity every day to do what they do best—to act on their strengths—are far more likely to flourish” (p. 189).

Teaching students to develop and apply their strengths is a process that allows students to answer the questions *Who am I? Who do I want to become? How do I relate to others?* and *How do we work effectively together?* The process begins by identifying and affirming students’ talents—their ways of processing information and relating to people, and habits that make them effective. All students bring to the college environment naturally recurring ways of behaving that enable them to be successful; rarely are those noted, however, once they enter the doors of higher education. The more typical process is for students to be assessed when they step on campus, their areas of deficiency highlighted, and a plan for remediation mapped out for them that has them spending most of their time in their first year of college addressing their areas of weakness. The problem with this deficit-remediation approach is that it does not tap into student motivation; it does not energize students or build a reservoir of confidence and self-efficacy within them. As is true with any of us, spending most of our time in our areas of weakness is often draining and demoralizing. Working on our weaknesses can potentially enable us to improve to the point of average, but it rarely enables us to excel, as has been demonstrated time and again in studies conducted across multiple disciplines.

When students’ talents are identified early in their first year of college, it sends a very different message to students. It communicates that they each have some-

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thing to contribute to the learning environment—there is something already within them that is valuable to us, as well as to their ability to succeed. Our mutual learning is enhanced by what they bring to the table. Imagine the difference this message can create in students who are from historically underrepresented populations or whose high school preparation was inadequate! Rather than feeling doomed by their demographics or their past experience, they hear that they already have some building blocks within them that have led them to be successful in the past—and their college experience will enable them to multiply those talents by teaching them specific skills and knowledge.

Strengths development is about taking the naturally recurring talents students already have within them, coupled with the energy they have when they are doing what they do best, and then teaching students to invest the necessary effort to gain the skills and knowledge that will develop their areas of talent into genuine *strengths*—productive actions they perform consistently well that enable them to succeed in their academics and relationships. The process of identifying these natural talents can be as simple as taking an online inventory such as the *Clifton StrengthsFinder* (published by The Gallup Organization) or as complex as a series of advising or counseling sessions that ask students about their past successes, what energizes them, what they love to do, and what others have noticed and complimented them on.

Once students have identified their talents, they are encouraged to develop those talents so that they become the person they want to be—the best version of themselves. This step incorporates the envisioning process outlined earlier, as students are encouraged to picture their graduation day in detail and then to outline how their unique combination of talent themes can be applied to help them reach that goal. Strategies for gaining specific skills and knowledge are outlined, with the emphasis on the necessity of investing time and energy in order to become the person they want to be and accomplish their goals. Working in small groups in class; journaling as part of a class assignment; or working one-on-one with advisors, career counsel-

ors, residence directors, or peer leaders; students' perspectives begin to change. Knowing their talents gives them the confidence to approach new and challenging situations; learning to develop and apply their talents equips them with the tools to succeed in academics and life. As a result, their college experience becomes more meaningful and goal-directed as students move from *Who am I?* to *Who do I want to become?* The present is more enjoyable, the future is brighter, and their satisfaction with the college experience is enhanced.

The strengths development process is not complete, however, until students have had a chance to see how their strengths affect others and have learned to identify and value the strengths in others who may be different from themselves. Recognizing the talents in others changes students' perspective of those who are different and enhances their relationships. Learning to work effectively with others, as each contributes their talents to the team, is a skill highly valued by future employers and is the culmination of the strengths development process. When we talk with students about their experiences in strengths development programs, it is this impact on relationships that they mention first.

A strengths development program on campus can be implemented in a variety of venues. First-year courses have been designed around this approach, and orientation programs for new students, transfer students, and even parents have successfully used the strengths development philosophy. Our previous work with strengths-based advising has demonstrated a significant impact on students' satisfaction, goal setting, grades, and persistence. Residence life programs, student leadership development programs, and athletic teams have all used this approach successfully to bolster students' confidence and performance while also building teamwork.

## A NEW VISION

**O**UR INVESTIGATION into college-student thriving has just begun to explore its potential for influencing the college experience. Addressing the elements of thriving can have positive outcomes at

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both the individual student and institutional levels. Because the components of thriving are malleable, offering interventions that target specific elements of thriving could enable students to experience greater fulfillment in their college experiences. Increasing students' ability to thrive on an individual level could affect institutional outcomes by increasing student persistence, academic success, and satisfaction.

A focus on thriving rather than merely surviving in college has the potential to change the way higher education views student success. Rather than defining success solely as grades and graduation, a focus on thriving encourages a more holistic view of student development that expands to include healthy relationships, sense of community, making a contribution, and proactively coping with life's challenges. Having thriving as our goal also changes the strategies we use to assist students; we move from deficit remediation to strengths development and from a focus on who students are and where they've been to who they want to become and where they're going. In short, we shift from failure prevention to success promotion. And most importantly, we begin to measure what matters—the development of a perspective on themselves, the world, and their future that equips students for success not only in college, but, more important, in life.

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