Students At Risk: Building on Strengths to Promote Success

Laurie A. Schreiner, PhD
Azusa Pacific University
USA

AZUSA PACIFIC UNIVERSITY

Overview

- Theoretical framework
- Strengths-based educational paradigm
- Measurement of students' strengths
- Process for building on student talents
- Connection to hope building
- Qualities of staff who impact at-risk students
- Opportunity to sample the *Clifton StrengthsFinder*

At-Risk Students

- Students whose
  - Academic preparation
  - Prior school performance
  - Personal characteristics that place the student in a population without a long or successful history in higher education
- Contribute to their academic failure or early departure from university

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Possible Selves

Goals, motives, thoughts, aspirations, fears about
- What we would like to become
- What we could become
- What we are afraid of becoming

Markus & Nurius, 1986

- At-risk students have already taken an important step toward achieving the possible self of "university graduate"
- But significant effort in university is needed to attain that possible self
- Sustained effort only happens when students are motivated

The Heart of It All: Student Motivation

- Quality of effort → success
- But motivation is the "fuel" for quality of effort – it generates and directs energy and effort
- So student motivation is the best predictor of the persistence that leads to success
- ***How are we motivating our at-risk students?***

The Deficit Paradigm of First-Year Student Assessment and Programming

- There are certain skills required to be successful in higher education
- 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?

- This approach does NOT tap into student motivation or lead to student engagement
- Deficit remediation *prevents failure*
- Building on talents *promotes success*

Strengths Philosophy

Building on talents produces greater gains than spending the same amount of time and effort fixing weaknesses

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$$\text{Talent} \times \text{Investment} = \text{Strength}$$

Predisposition   EFFORT   Developed

Skills   Knowledge

Investment is a MULTIPLIER of talent!

Talents

Ways of seeing the world

Ways of processing information

Ways of relating to people

Habits that enable success

STRENGTH: Consistently positive performance in a specific area

Identifying Strengths: The *Clifton StrengthsFinder™*

- Online instrument published by The Gallup Organization
- Identifies 5 signature themes of talent that can be developed into strengths
- 34 possible themes
- Strong construct validity and good test-retest reliability among students in higher education
- Used with over 4 million people in 17 languages – and 300,000 post-secondary students

Example of a Signature Theme of Talent on the *Clifton StrengthsFinder*

- Strategic
  - Sees patterns where others only see complexity
  - Multiple paths and solutions generated, so always has Plan B
  - Can quickly sort through the clutter and see what won't work
  - Asks "what if?" in order to prepare for the future

StrengthsQuest

Text: Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner. (2006). *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond*

Includes specific action items for each talent theme
- academic success
- career planning
- relationships
- co-curricular activities

Building Strengths

1. Identify the natural talent themes
2. Affirm those themes with significant others
3. Develop the themes by learning knowledge and practicing skills – invest energy and effort
4. Apply the developed strengths to new or challenging situations
5. Combine the strengths with other talents you have—and with the talents of others—to produce excellence

The Focus Changes

FROM:
- Problems
- Attendance
- Preparation
- Putting into the student
- Average
- Apathy or discouragement

TO:
- Possibilities
- Engagement
- Motivation
- Drawing out from the student
- Excellence
- Hope

The GPA of Hope

- GOALS
  - Clear and connected to a valued future
  - Realistic
- PATHWAYS
  - Multiple strategies (Plan B)
  - Personalized
- AGENCY
  - Energy
  - Support from others

Hope Scores in At-Risk Students

Posttest Hope

Control Group

Strengths Group

$p<.05$; Gomez, 2008

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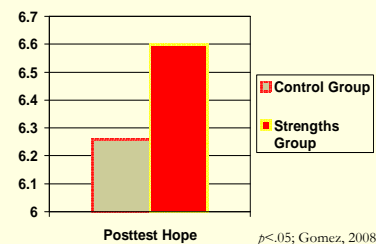
Staff Who Impact At-Risk Students

- 62 at-risk students who are currently successful were interviewed (9 different institutions)
- The staff they named as significantly impacting their ability to succeed were also interviewed and took the *Clifton StrengthsFinder*
- Qualities most evident:
  - Focus was on students and their success
  - Enjoyed students and wanted to connect with them
  - Genuineness and authenticity
  - Desire to impact students' lives
  - Passion – they love what they do
  - Enthusiastic teachers who were not afraid to be different
  - Respect for students and a belief in their ability to achieve
  - Challenging
  - WIDE variety of signature themes on the *Clifton StrengthsFinder* – but their themes were **congruent** with what students saw in them that led to excellence

      --Schreiner, Noel, Anderson, & Cantwell, 2008

Succeeding With At-Risk Students

- Build on students' strengths + connect their strengths to
  - The self they want to become
  - Pathways to achieving that possible self
  - The strengths of others
    - A person is a person through other human beings
    - "I am, because you are; you are because we are"

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