Positive Psychology and Higher Education

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Over the last two decades, it has become increasingly clear that intelligence and ability are not the only determinants of students' and schools' academic successes (Dweck, 1999; 2006). Indeed, if students' cognitive capacity were the only predictor of academic achievement and retention, efforts to enhance knowledge and skills (i.e., what colleges and universities are charged to do) would result in far less "lost talent" (Hanson, 1994). That is, if cognitive ability solely predicted academic outcome, 4 out of 10 of the students most likely to succeed each year (i.e., those students beginning their college career as full-time freshmen in four-year colleges and universities) would not become disengaged from higher learning (Berkner, He, & Citaldi, 2002).

As institutions of higher learning grapple with enhancing the knowledge, talent, and contributions of their students and engage their students from freshman year to graduation, the burgeoning social science initiative of Positive Psychology studies and promotes human strengths and the conditions that lead people to function optimally (see Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Clifton & Nelson, 1992; Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Lopez & Snyder, 2003; Linley & Joseph, 2004; Rath & Clifton, 2004; Seligman, 2002; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). This developing body of scholarly evidence can buttress the efforts of colleges and universities to fulfill both the needs of the students and their schools.

Positive Psychology and a strengths-based approach to higher education should not be confused with fads that have swept through higher education. Fads are often atheoretical and are only loosely associated with an educational or psychological research base. Strengths-based education is actually a return to basic educational principles that emphasized the positive aspects of student effort and achievement, as well as their strengths. Alfred Binet's (Binet & Simon, 1916) work in the early twentieth century was dedicated to enhancing the skills of students and to addressing deficits, not solely remediating problems. Elizabeth Hurlock's (1925) seminal work highlighted how praise of students' work has a more powerful effect on math performance than criticism of students' efforts. Lewis Terman (Terman & Oden, 1947) dedicated his life to studying the "best of the best" that entered college in an effort to identify the characteristics of success. Arthur Chickering (1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993), in the context of his original college student development theory, called for more attention to the development of a student's broad-based talent. And, numerous educational philosophers (e.g., John Dewey, Benjamin Franklin, John Stuart Mill, Herbert Spencer) have reinforced educators' commitment to enhancing the best qualities of students.

Strengths-based education, though grounded in historical practices and positive psychological science, is also built on two modern-day educational

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aspirations: (1) the *measurement* of achievement (Carey, 2004; DOE, 2004), strengths, and determinants of positive outcomes (Lopez, 2004) and (2) *individualization*, which involves educational professionals spontaneously thinking about and acting upon the interests and needs of each student and systematically making efforts to personalize the learning experience (Gallup, 2004; Levitz & Noel, 2000). These practices identify and marshal the academic and positive psychological resources of each student.

By building on historical educational principles and by taking advantage of the best of Positive Psychology, strengths-based education could drive a transformation of the American system of colleges and universities. Imagine an educational system that develops the individual strengths of our young people so they may realize their personal potential and fulfill a loftier goal — that of creating a thriving community of civically responsible and productive members; it may very well be attainable.

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