

In the final part of this series on student thriving, Laurie Schreiner describes how students who thrive turn outward and engage with the world through healthy interpersonal relationships and service to their communities.

By Laurie A. Schreiner

Thriving in Community

AS WAVES OF STUDENTS enter our campuses this fall, our collective attention is typically on our first-year students—those who are often the most vulnerable and in need of strategies for success. The assumption is that if we start students off right, they will succeed; our job is to provide a foundational experience in the first year that puts students on a trajectory for graduation. But what do we do after the first year? What experiences have we designed to ensure the ongoing success of all students? How do we continue to connect students to the fabric of the institution so that they not only succeed academically but also develop as people? A closer examination of most of our campuses leads to the conclusion that although we may provide a smorgasbord of opportunities for students, there tends to be little intentionality about the way in which we design programs and services and connect students to them. We may track students' academic progress, but do we monitor their growth and development in any other way? As professionals committed to the education of the whole person, what does this say about our support of holistic student development?

These questions have intrigued me as I have reflected on the experiences of Angela and Carla, the at-risk Latina students whose stories I have told in the last two issues of *About Campus*. Both began college full of anticipation and anxiety, underprepared for their college experience. Both graduated. Yet the distinctive differences I observed between the two young women's college experiences became the trigger for much of my research on college-student thriving. Both had performed academically to a level worthy of a bachelor's degree, but Angela seemed to have benefited far more from her college experience than Carla did. Angela graduated eager to begin her new job with a local domestic violence shelter, a result of connections she had made during service-learning courses. She was excited about her future, confident that she was well equipped to succeed. She was surrounded by friends, had positive relationships with faculty, and had been involved in meaningful campus activities throughout her college years. In contrast, Carla had not yet decided what she would do after college. She remained as unsure of herself and her abilities as when she had

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entered college at risk. She had stayed on the margins of the college experience—going to classes, attending events sporadically as her work schedule allowed, and interacting with faculty only to clarify an assignment. Despite her diploma, I felt that to some degree we had failed her—we had not attended as carefully to her personal growth and development as we had to her academic progress.

In the national study of college-student thriving that I have described earlier in *About Campus* (May/June), what became clear as we interviewed students was that they did not consider themselves to be thriving in college unless they were in positive relationships with others. They might be getting good grades and progressing toward a degree, but if they did not have rewarding connections with others on campus, they felt something was missing in their lives. As one student phrased it, “a lot of my thriving here is defined by my relationships. The relationships I’ve been able to make and probably keep—that is a huge part of my thriving.”

The focus of this final part of the series on thriving is on the interpersonal aspects of thriving in college—the social connections, sense of community on campus, openness to diversity, and desire to make a difference in the lives of others that characterize students who are flourishing in the postsecondary environment. This aspect of thriving is significantly predictive of students’ perception that the institution is a good fit for them; it also significantly predicts their intent to graduate from that institution. It typically is not strongly associated with students’ academic performance, but it is highly correlated with their satisfaction with the college experience.

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rience. Because it has the potential to influence students’ quality of life as well as their decision to remain enrolled in college, it is a construct worth exploring in higher education.

AN OVERVIEW OF THRIVING

IN THE PREVIOUS TWO ISSUES of *About Campus*, I have described the national study of college-student thriving that I have conducted with my doctoral students at Azusa Pacific University over the past several years. Our validated and reliable 35-item Thriving Quotient has been administered to over 15,000 college students across more than 70 institutions in the United States and Canada. The instrument was developed after exploring the positive psychology literature on human flourishing and the higher education literature on student success, then interviewing scores of students across multiple campuses. Our goal was to measure aspects of a college student’s psychological functioning that were amenable to change, so that interventions could be designed to enable a higher percentage of students to get the most out of their college experience.

Our research has demonstrated that college student thriving consists of five malleable factors: (1) a positive perspective of oneself and one’s future, (2) engagement in the learning process, (3) investment of effort and self-regulation of one’s learning behaviors, (4) healthy relationships and connections to others on campus, and (5) openness to diversity and the desire to make a contribution to the lives of others. We have labeled these five factors positive perspective, engaged learning, academic determination, social connectedness, and diverse citizenship. Together, they can explain up to an additional 20 percent of the variation in such student outcomes as GPA, intent to graduate, learning gains, learning satisfaction, and perception of institutional fit, over and above the contribution of students’ demographic characteristics and features of the institution they attend. In the first two articles of this three-part series, I outlined the positive perspective, engaged learning, and academic determination components of thriving in college. In this final article, I will highlight the role that interpersonal relationships

play, focusing on the social connectedness and diverse citizenship components of thriving.

SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

WHETHER THE RESEARCH is on psychological well-being, physical health, or student success in college, most studies conclude that relationships play an important role in positive life outcomes. For example, Ed Diener's cross-national studies of well-being found that there is only one factor that consistently predicted well-being in every country studied: social relationships. Large-scale epidemiological studies by health researchers have documented that a lack of social relationships has the same effect on a person's mortality rate as a lifetime of cigarette smoking according to psychologists Natalya Maisel and Shelly Gable. And John Bean's research on student retention led him to encourage institutional officials "to recognize that social connectedness is important for retention" (p. 229).

Thriving students are connected to others on and off campus in healthy ways; they have people in their lives who support them, listen to them, and spend time with them. They also feel they are a part of the campus community, recognizing that they matter to others on campus, that they have a contribution to make to the community of learners, and that they can work with other campus members toward important goals. Both these facets of social connectedness are important to thriving: the individual relationships and the sense of being part of a larger community on the college campus.

Healthy Relationships

Positive relationships with specific individuals form one of the facets of social connectedness. It is not a question of how many friends one has, but rather of the extent to which students believe there are specific individuals to whom they matter. Is there someone willing to listen? Does anyone care what happens to me? Am I understood and appreciated by anyone?

The ability to form and maintain healthy relationships helps students benefit from other aspects of the college environment. The social support that friends provide can sustain a student through difficult challenges. The connections to trusted others, along with a concern for others and an understanding of the give and take of human relationships, is a resource that can bolster student engagement and motivate students to become more involved in all that the college experience has to offer.

Sense of Community on Campus

The second facet of social connectedness is feeling a sense of belonging on campus, what psychologists refer to as a sense of community. John Lounsbury and Daniel DeNeui have concluded that students who experience a strong sense of community on campus feel that they are part of something larger than themselves; they feel they are part of a stable and dependable network of people who care about them, are committed to their growth and well-being, and are able to meet their needs. Research conducted by David Cheng at Columbia University has demonstrated that key components of students' sense of community on campus are feeling that they are cared about by others on campus, feeling valued by the institution, feeling at home on campus, not being lonely, and being connected to the larger mission and goals of the institution. He also found that "what connects students with the community is not just small circles of friends who share personal interests; it is also effective programming and organized social opportunities" (p. 228). However, he discovered that most student activities and groups did not foster a sense of community on campus; rather, the largest contributor to a sense of community was a campus ethos centered around engagement in learning, an environment in which students felt accepted and valued and were encouraged to express their own opinions and beliefs.

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Sylvia Hurtado and Deborah Carter have highlighted the importance of a sense of belonging among Latina/o students, and their findings have been replicated within other racial groups by other researchers. They focus on the concept of *membership* as the hallmark of a sense of belonging and have established that the ease of transition in the first year and the climate for diversity on campus are both important contributors to Latina/o students' sense of belonging.

As Latina students, both Angela and Carla had entered a predominantly white institution as first-generation students with strong connections to their families and home community, but with little social capital to navigate the university. Although both experienced the same campus ethos during their four years of college, they were part of significantly different campus groups. Angela continued to rely on her family and church for strong social support; she also was part of an orientation group in her first year that connected her to a service-learning site where she continued to volunteer and maintain social ties during her college years. She was involved in the choir throughout her college years, having been encouraged by her first-year peer leader to connect her passion for music to intentional campus involvement. In contrast, Carla had little contact with most of her family, believing that her best chance for college success was to distance herself from her family's lack of education. Her orientation group her first year was purely social, and as the sole Latina in the group she had felt like an outsider most of the time. She had never had anyone on campus help connect her to campus groups or resources. Left to her own devices, she attended a few events but never found her niche. Yet her experience could have been so different, as social connectedness is a changeable aspect of a student's life. Despite personality tendencies toward introversion or extroversion, all students are capable of developing strong social ties with others and of feeling a part of the campus community.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: STRATEGIES FOR FOSTERING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS

FOSTERING SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS among students is a task in which all members of the campus community have a part to play. In an effort to highlight unique ways that faculty and student affairs practitioners can influence this component of student thriving, I have taken the basic concepts of a sense of community from the psychological literature and have formulated specific strategies that can be implemented on college campuses in order to strengthen students' social connectedness. The four components of a sense of community that form the basis of these strategies are (1) *membership* (sense of belonging), (2) *relationship* (positive interactions with others), (3) *ownership* (voice and contribution), and (4) *partnership* (interdependence and working toward common goals).

Membership: Nurturing a Sense of Belonging

Central to students' sense of community is whether they feel they belong on campus. As Sylvia Hurtado and Deborah Carter note, this feeling of belonging is not as much about integration and fitting into the norms of the mainstream community as it is about feeling that there is a place for oneself somewhere within the campus community—and the way the institution helps students transition to campus life in the first year is a critical ingredient in their subsequent sense of belonging. Institutions can enhance membership through the clear expectations they communicate to students before they arrive on campus. The more familiar students are with the university, the easier their transition is. The use of rituals, traditions, honor codes, symbols of the university, and telling the campus "stories" enhances students' feeling that they are now members of a community. Celebrating the accomplishments of students and faculty and creating symbolic rites of passage as students progress successfully

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through their college years can be powerful ways of honoring members of the community and for tangibly demonstrating the value the university places on those members. Helping new students find their niche on campus, whether in clubs and organizations or in specific roles and tasks on campus such as service learning, work-study programming, or learning communities, facilitates the development of their membership in the academic community on campus.

Relationship: Encouraging Positive Interactions With Others

Individual relationships go hand in hand with the development of a sense of community. The more positive interactions students have with peers, faculty, and staff, the stronger their sense of community on campus. Positive interactions with others can be facilitated by institutions as they organize campus events. Although most institutions facilitate these relationships among first-year students during orientation and the first few weeks of a term, the assumption is that getting students started right is all that is required. Yet in research I have done with sophomores across the country, a significant number state that one of their biggest challenges was the feeling that all institutional support had been removed after their first year. A total of 36 percent reported that even by the end of their second year they were still feeling lonely and wished the institution provided more opportunities for them to make friends.

This finding emphasizes the importance of institutional supports that go beyond the first year. Helping students make the transition to college is an important first step, but there need to be intentional mechanisms on campus for continuing to connect students to social networks after the first year. Alexander Astin's model of student involvement highlights the positive role that involvement on campus plays in students' learning and

development; David Cheng's research has found that the involvement needs to be selective, intentional, and meaningfully connected to the larger campus community for students to derive the most benefit.

Specific strategies for helping students build healthy relationships on campus include not only connecting students to meaningful ways of being involved on campus, but also ensuring that all students are respected. Affirming campus standards of civility, protecting students from harassment and discrimination, promoting racial harmony, and celebrating the diversity of the student body provide a supportive context for the development of healthy relationships. Providing opportunities for interaction between students and faculty, encouraging departments to connect early and often with students interested in their major, and providing role models of healthy interactions among faculty and staff all can help students develop strong social networks on campus.

On residential campuses, the residence hall can be a place where academic, social, and cultural aspects of campus life can be successfully integrated. On commuter campuses, however, the development of social networks happens largely in the classroom. As Arthur Chickering notes, "Close working relationships with other students not only provide emotional support but also powerfully strengthen educational gains from the formal curriculum" (p. 29). Faculty development programs can teach instructors ways of building community in the classroom, through the use of collaborative learning techniques, teaching to students' strengths and learning styles, and providing an appropriate balance of challenge and support. Beyond individual classes, forming learning communities or block scheduling courses throughout the curriculum—not just in the first year—can be one of the most powerful means of fostering relationships and thereby enhancing students' sense of community on campus.

Ownership: Cultivating Students' Voice and Contribution

Although students may feel a sense of belonging and have positive interactions with others, a sense of community on campus is incomplete without an intentional commitment from both students and the institution to take ownership for the creation of such community. Institutions can foster ownership by seeking students' voice in decision making. In return, as students feel a sense of ownership they are more likely to allow the institution to influence them in positive ways, so that there is greater congruence between their own values and goals and those of the campus community.

Cultivating students' voice and communicating to students that they have an important contribution to make to the campus community can occur in several ways. Including students on campus committees ensures that the student perspective is present and communicates to all students that their opinions matter. Regular dialogue between the student government and the senior leadership of the university, creating student advisory boards and disciplinary committees, and promoting shared governance in the residence halls are also effective means for enhancing students' sense of ownership. For those students who are not able to be directly involved in such governance, ownership can be enhanced by clearly articulating to all students the channels available for expressing complaints or providing feedback to senior leadership. Effective internal communication with students so that they know what is happening on campus, where to go for help, and how to become involved is also key to a sense of ownership. Finally, ownership increases as students have the opportunity to rate their levels of satisfaction with all aspects of the university. Using an instrument such as the *Student Satisfaction Inventory*, that I co-authored with Stephanie Juillerat, and annually communicating to students the results and what actions the senior leadership will take based on the results, sends a strong

message to students that the institution values them and is responsive to their needs. As John Braxton, Amy Hirschy, and Shederick McClendon note, this institutional commitment to student welfare is reflected in an "abiding concern for the growth and development of its students" (p. 22) that clearly communicates the high value it places on students. It is a powerful lever for promoting social integration and, ultimately, student persistence.

Partnership: Working Together Toward Common Goals

The final component of a sense of community on campus is interdependence, a belief that one's needs will be met by remaining in relationship and that one can meet the needs of others in the community as well. There is a synergy about this component of the sense of community; partnership implies that by working together we can accomplish far more than any of us could individually.

There are many ways that faculty and student affairs professionals can foster a sense of community by creating partnerships in which students may engage. Faculty-student collaboration on research projects—as long as students are treated as co-contributors to the project—is one such partnership, as is faculty-student interaction around mutual interests outside of class. Other partnerships may be among peers, as students collaborate on learning teams in the classroom or tutor one another. Campus organizations and clubs can be encouraged to set "stretch" goals for the year and to engage in projects that require high levels of collaboration and will have a positive impact on the campus. Academic support services can cultivate a partnership model with students by working with faculty and student affairs professionals to identify students at risk and provide timely services to them before they experience disillusionment or failure. Service learning promotes partnership between students and community members, while internships and cooperative education

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programs can foster student partnerships with local agencies and businesses. All these examples of partnerships have as their foundation a mutual respect for what each person brings to the relationship, a commitment to a goal that transcends one's own interests, and reciprocity as their hallmark. These features build powerful partnerships that strengthen the sense of community that a student experiences as a member of the campus community.

DIVERSE CITIZENSHIP

THRYING IN COMMUNITY is not just about the social connections students form with one another and with members of the campus community; it is also about the impact they have on others and their desire to make a difference in the world. As we heard repeatedly in our interviews with students, thriving is not just about oneself, but is also about what one does for others. Our conceptualization of diverse citizenship is based on two aspects vital to interpersonal thriving: an openness and valuing of difference in others and active involvement with others to make the world a better place.

Openness to Diversity

Thriving students are distinguished by the way they perceive others who are different. They view difference as an occasion for learning and seek out opportunities to engage with others who have a different background or perspective on life. They are capable of seeing multiple perspectives and are not threatened by alternative viewpoints. According to Patricia King and Marcia Baxter Magolda, this intercultural maturity reflects students' developmental processes in their cognitive complexity. The capacity to internalize one's own values and beliefs, while respecting others' rights to hold differing values and beliefs, is a level of self-authorship that does not often occur until the later college years and beyond. Yet our studies have indicated that this quality exists in thriving students across all class levels.

The benefits of this openness to diversity are myriad. Greater critical thinking skills, active engage-

ment in learning, principled reasoning, higher academic confidence, and what Patricia Gurin, Eric Dey, Sylvia Hurtado, and Gerald Gurin label "democratic outcomes" all accrue as students become more open to differences in others. As students become aware of multiple perspectives and learn to value differences, their likelihood of engaging civically in actions that benefit the greater good or promote social justice increases as well. Thomas Nelson Laird notes that even before the actions occur, students' sense of social agency—their belief in the value of contributing to their community, correcting social injustices, and making the world a better place—is impacted by their increasing levels of openness to diversity, as well as by their actual encounters with diverse persons and viewpoints.

Citizenship

Accompanying the openness to diversity and belief that differences enrich the learning experience is a commitment to make a difference in the world. In our factor analysis of the Thriving Quotient, this citizenship component loaded on the same factor as the openness to diversity items, leading us to label the factor *diverse citizenship*. Thriving students not only are open to diverse viewpoints and value differences in others, but they also believe that it is their responsibility to contribute to the community around them and make a positive difference. This component of thriving reflects what the Higher Education Research Institute refers to as "the value of caring about others" in its Social Change Model of Leadership Development (p. 65).

Caring about others and working with others to make a positive difference in the world moves thriving students from an introspective focus on self to an engagement with the world around them. As psychologist Corey Keyes notes, this element of social well-being is a critical aspect of positive mental health and life satisfaction. People who are connected in substantive ways to others and who involve themselves in the larger community around them by taking actions for the common good derive a multitude of mental

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and physical health benefits. Among college students, this contribution to the greater good has the potential to reduce the number of negative psychological symptoms students experience, along with serving as a buffer for stress. Jane Piliavin has demonstrated that the benefits of serving others accrue in self-esteem, a strengthened immune system that protects against disease, and greater satisfaction with one's life. This finding confirms many teachings within the major religious traditions of the world, as well. Learning to love your neighbor as yourself appears to be a pivotal aspect of thriving during the college years.

In our study, students' scores on the diverse citizenship scale of the Thriving Quotient were significantly predictive of their satisfaction with the college experience and their intent to graduate from their institutions. We have also found that the higher their scores on this scale, the higher their critical thinking skills. Finding ways to strengthen students' openness to diversity and desire to make a positive difference in the world can lead to valuable outcomes for both the student and the institution.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: ENCOUNTERS WITH DIFFERENCE

CONSIDERABLE RESEARCH supports the clear implication that the more students interact with others who are different from themselves, the more they grow cognitively and interpersonally. Three specific types of intervention arise from our research on the diverse citizenship component of thriving, each targeting areas of the college campus where diverse interactions can be encouraged: (1) at the individual student level, connecting students to specific activities that are well-established mechanisms for developing an openness to diversity and the desire to make a positive difference in the lives of others; (2) within the classroom, structuring the content and the pedagogy of courses to provide students with an encounter of different voices and viewpoints; and (3) within student life programming, structuring campus activities and

events to encourage cross-racial interaction and substantive dialogue with diverse perspectives.

Encourage Students to Engage in Specific Activities That Will Enhance Their Diverse Citizenship

Three activities that are well-established mechanisms for encouraging interaction with difference already exist on most college campuses: study-abroad programs, service-learning courses, and living-learning communities. However, the effectiveness of these programs for impacting students' openness to diversity and willingness to make a positive difference for others depends on several key ingredients. First, is there opportunity for sustained contact? A one-shot service-learning day does little to foster diverse citizenship because there is not prolonged contact based on equal status. In the same way, study-abroad programs where all the American students live together separated from the surrounding culture does not promote the diverse citizenship inherent in college-student thriving. Second, is there adequate support and a safe environment for conflict resolution? Simply throwing students into a diverse living-learning community, service-learning site, or study-abroad experience without adequate training or preparation and with no support when conflict occurs is not likely to promote an openness to diversity, but rather its opposite: a confirmation of stereotypes and a tendency to shut down in the face of a threat. Finally, is there a common goal that requires collaboration across differences? When service-learning opportunities are organized as partnerships rather than as charity, when living-learning communities have themes and specific goals to which all members ascribe, and when study-abroad programs are structured so that American students work in tandem with indigenous students as part of learning teams, there is greater potential for the experience to make a lasting difference in students' cognitive and interpersonal growth.

Create Classrooms That Value and Celebrate Diversity

The college classroom is the one experience that all students have in common, and can be the venue

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for some of the most profound changes in students' openness to diversity and commitment to difference making. When students are exposed to a variety of viewpoints in a safe environment where they know the instructor has their best interests at heart, they are challenged and stretched in ways that promote not only their intellectual engagement but also a healthy sense of self. Cognitive growth occurs as students encounter discrepant viewpoints and alternative perspectives; emotional growth occurs as they navigate the waters of conflict resolution and learn to stay in relationships with one another despite those differences.

Such classroom experiences are not isolated to ethnic or gender studies. Although ethnic and gender studies courses often epitomize the type of intellectual and emotional stretching that lead to positive outcomes, successful first-year seminars have also cultivated a safe environment for the exploration of difference. Any course can promote the development of the diverse citizenship aspect of thriving if the instructor structures the dialogue, reading assignments, and projects around a variety of viewpoints; communicates that more than one perspective is valid; and facilitates a respect for difference as an expectation of all class members. Helping faculty feel comfortable with differing viewpoints themselves and teaching them to manage classroom conflict can be an important goal for faculty-development programs.

Structure Campus Activities and Events to Promote Interactional Diversity

The bottom line, however, is that nothing is as powerful in shaping students' diverse citizenship as actual experience with others who are different from themselves. When the institution sends a strong signal that honoring differences is a key value of the institution, the foundation is set for positive interactional diversity—conversations in and out of class around politics, world events, differing religious views, cultural differences, and divergent worldviews. It is not simply the interaction with difference that matters; it is also the quality of that interaction. Negative interactions with others who are dif-

ferent simply serve to solidify stereotypes and perpetuate mistrust; positive interactions, on the other hand, can shift previously held beliefs and open students to new learning experiences. As Victor Saenz, Hoi Ning Ngai, and Sylvia Hurtado have discovered in their multi-institutional studies, however, the greater the structural diversity on campus, the more likely it is that students will have positive and meaningful interactions with persons who are different from themselves. Diversity does not inevitably lead to conflict; the more opportunities students have for both formal and informal interactions with others who are different, the more likely it is those interactions will be positive.

Institutions can structure such interaction formally through diversity awareness workshops or events, living-learning communities of diverse students, academic support services that place students in diverse learning teams, and student leadership-development programs. But institutions can also facilitate the informal interactions students have with diverse others by providing places for a wide variety of students to socialize, study together, eat together, and play together.

CONCLUSION

REFLECTING BACK on the different experiences that my two students had during their four years of college and the different outcomes those experiences produced, I realized that much of students' ability to derive the maximum benefits from their college experience can be influenced by the choices we make as institutions, and as individual faculty, staff, and administrators. Angela and Carla had both entered the institution unsure of themselves, labeled "at risk" because of their family background and prior academic experiences. Angela had encounters with significant people and programs that helped her see herself differently and gain the confidence to get involved and take responsibility for her learning and personal development. In contrast, Carla's encounters had been with representatives of the institution who were doing "business as usual" with little intentional-

ity about the impact they were having on her view of herself and her future.

If in fact we take seriously our belief that the purpose of higher education is to help students grow intellectually, psychologically, and relationally, there is much to be done. Institutionally, we can affect the percentage of students who thrive on our campuses in the messages we send to students about their value to us, in the intentionality with which we approach student engagement in and out of the classroom across all class levels, and in the decisions we make about hiring faculty and staff. As individual faculty and student affairs professionals, we can affect student thriving in the daily choices we make, choices to dialogue rather than direct, to encourage rather than criticize, to see possibilities rather than problems, and to actively promote student success rather than simply prevent failure. When we do, a greater number of students will not only survive college, they will thrive—and so will we.

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