CHAPTER 5

ASSESSMENT OF STUDENTS' STRENGTHS THE FIRST STEP TO STUDENT SUCCESS

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The widening of access to higher education that has occurred in post-apartheid South Africa has had nothing less than transformation as its goal, with equity and redress identified as critical elements in this process (Department of Education [DoE], 2002). As greater percentages of students who were previously denied access to higher education are now entering the higher education system, there is a need for curricula and staff to be responsive to the variety of learning needs of a more diverse student population. With this expanded access also comes an enhanced concern for retention and graduation rates. As noted by the Council on Higher Education (CHE) report on Improving Teaching and Learning Resources, 'the challenge of widening access and participation is to ensure that those to whom access is granted have a fair chance of academic success' (CHE, 2004:4).

A 2007 report by the CHE indicated that, while access to higher education has improved somewhat in the post-apartheid era, academic success continues to be 'racially differentiated'. Five years after entering, an average of 30% of first-time students had graduated, but the ratio of white to black African graduates was more than two to one (Scott, Yeld & Hendry, 2007:iv). The report concluded:

Since the majority of students entering the sector are not completing their studies, it can be reasonably inferred that the existing system is not effective in contemporary conditions. Furthermore, as the data analysis shows, the groups from which growth in output must primarily come are those that are least well served by the existing educational process. (Scott *et al.*, 2007:21)

The increased access to higher education that has been a priority for South Africa necessitates that the needs of diverse learners be considered in the design and implementation of education programmes and services. Continuing to provide

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the same type of teaching and academic support that was appropriate for a more homogenous student population is no longer adequate to address the level of educational disadvantage and underpreparedness of incoming students.

A similar issue of addressing the increased access and diversity of students in higher education has been faced in American higher education. With the increased rate of access that occurred in US higher education in the 1970s came the task of ensuring the success of these more diverse students. Students from low-income families were plagued by inadequate academic preparation and familial support. Students of colour often came from these low-income families, many of whom were also the first in their family to enter higher education (Ishitani, 2006).

First-year student programmes

In an effort to assist all students in their transition into higher education and ensure their persistence to graduation, American institutions began to design first-year experience programmes. They were facing national statistics that indicated 75% of students who dropped out did so in the first year (American College of Testing, 2007). Recognising that the early weeks of a university student's experience played a critical role in determining the likelihood of their graduating, these programmes had student retention as their initial goal (Upcraft, Gardner & Barefoot, 2005). Over the past two decades, those goals have expanded to include such outcomes as students' academic and social integration (Cox, 2005). The expanded goals include introducing students to campus resources (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005), encouraging peer interaction (Hunter & Linder, 2003), and providing an opportunity for students to increase their self-awareness and skills (Hunter & Linder, 2005). Currently about 80% of all US postsecondary institutions offer a first-year course to facilitate the accomplishment of these goals (Tobolowsky, 2005).

A similar effort is underway in many South African institutions of higher education, with the recognition that foundational provision is necessary to assist 'talented but disadvantaged students who are underprepared for a traditional curriculum' (Scott *et al.*, 2007:44). Although the inadequacies of the schooling system contribute significantly to the difficulties students encounter in higher education, the CHE report emphasises the responsibility of the higher education sector to address the key factors that are under their control. These include affective factors such as student confidence and motivation to succeed.

The role of assessment

Fundamental to many first-year programmes is the role that student assessment plays upon entry to the university. Most institutions assess a wide variety of students' skills, attitudes and competencies in the first weeks of the first term. This reflects a foundational assumption that deficit remediation is the most effective strategy for enabling students to successfully complete a university degree (Schreiner, 2006b).

Out of a concern for meeting students' needs and being sensitive to their lack of adequate preparation for college, postsecondary educators focus on students' areas of deficit and build programmes and services around them. Staff go to great lengths to assess the abilities of entering college students and to place them in remedial courses or provide special services based on the deficits discovered in the assessment process (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).

Barefoot notes that when faculty are asked about the challenges inherent in acclimatising students to the campus community, many will comment on the 'deficiencies of the students themselves ... rarely is there a sustained focus on and acknowledgment of the strengths of contemporary students' (Barefoot, 2000:13). As a result of this perspective, one of the core objectives of many first-year seminar programmes is to systematically attend to the inadequate college preparation that characterises many incoming students. Although this deficit-remediation strategy is designed to promote student success, it may actually serve to reduce students' motivation, effort, and investment in the learning process. Scott *et al.* (2007) concur as they note that underprepared students are likely to feel demoralised in an institutional climate that emphasises their deficiencies.

The deficit remediation approach to higher education has been an attempt to create a more equitable system of achievement for students regardless of their socio-economic status, ethnicity, gender, or level of academic preparation. However, it is clear that this approach has not created an entirely successful or equitable system. South Africa's success patterns mirror those of the United States: racial differentiation continues to be evident in the graduation ratios (Scott *et al.*, 2007; US Department of Education, 2008). Therefore, the question of how to ensure student success has been only partially answered by focusing on a student's areas of weakness.

Higher education is not unique in its deficit-based approach to improved success. Surveys conducted by The Gallup Organization in countries around the world show that the majority of people surveyed believe that addressing weaknesses will produce greater improvement than will an emphasis on their strengths (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). Addressing weaknesses can indeed result in at least short-term improvement: performance often improves, but not to levels of excellence and often at a very high price. Attrition rates remain very high among at-risk students, and low levels of academic motivation are often the norm (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). In addition, as Yarbrough noted, advising encounters that consist of 'probing questions designed to illuminate and clarify the shortcomings and inadequacies of the student ... [are] potentially demoralizing' (Yarbrough, 2002:63). As a result of this reduced motivation, students become less involved in the campus community, believing that they do not really belong there in the first place, and they actively avoid and resist the very services designed to help them overcome these inadequacies. Instructors and staff then invest less time and energy with these students, either believing that they should not have been admitted to university or believing that the students are not motivated enough to overcome their weaknesses (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). When student weakness is the focus of attention, a vicious cycle

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of low expectations is initiated among students, professors, and staff alike. In short, deficit-based remediation largely fails to address the most fundamental challenge in producing high academic achievement: student engagement in his/her own learning.

The importance of affective factors in student learning

Motivating students to take responsibility for their own learning process stands as the primary challenge for educators (Perry, Hall & Ruthig, 2005). Instructors are faced with the increasingly daunting task of engaging students in learning, as a wider spectrum of prior learning experiences and diversity of talents characterise today's college students. The talent development approach (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh & Whitt, 2005), which acknowledges and capitalises on the strengths students bring to the learning environment, provides a foundation for student success in its recognition that all students can learn under the right conditions. Based on over two decades of research on first-year students, some authors recommend that precisely because first-year students have a wide range of ability levels when entering college, institutions need to consider how to promote the growth of all incoming students while considering how to 'build on first-year students' strengths rather than their deficiencies' (Gardner, Upcraft & Barefoot, 2005:519). Scott *et al.* note that:

A key feature of successful approaches is that they are not 'remedial' but in various ways recognize and build on the capabilities that students bring with them into higher education, rather than being bound by traditional assumptions about what these capabilities should be. (Scott *et al.*, 2007:45)

This approach is more likely to have a positive effect on students' motivation, as it encourages students to build on what already lies within them (Clifton, Anderson & Schreiner, 2006).

Authentic motivation that is self-initiated and self-regulated arises in settings where needs for competence, relatedness, and autonomy are met (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Equipped with this knowledge, institutions can design their students' first-year experiences around areas of strength that will build a sense of personal competence within a supportive network of relationships and choices. In contrast to extrinsic motivation, authentic motivation produces higher levels of 'interest, excitement, and confidence, which in turn is manifest both as enhanced performance, persistence, and creativity ... and as heightened vitality ..., self-esteem ..., and general well-being ... (Ryan & Deci, 2000:69). When students are authentically motivated, they are more likely to engage in the learning process. Such engagement produces higher levels of academic performance as well as the kind of content mastery that lasts beyond the final exam. It also facilitates student growth and development, leading to psychological well-being and persistence to graduation (Kuh *et al.*, 2005).

The strengths-based approach to student success

The concept that individuals develop more and perform at higher levels when they build on their existing talents than when they make comparable efforts to remediate

their areas of weakness, is at the heart of the strengths-based philosophy (Clifton & Harter, 2003). In contrast to much of the conventional wisdom in education, which asserts that helping students improve areas of deficiency is likely to lead to their success, the strengths philosophy is founded upon the premise that the key to achieving at levels of personal excellence lies in teaching people to identify and capitalise on their greatest areas of talent. In this paradigm, weaknesses are not ignored, but are instead addressed through the skillful use of existing strengths (Clifton & Harter, 2003).

Such an approach focuses on affirming the unique strengths of each student, which can be defined as a consistent ability to do something very well (Clifton *et al.*, 2006) or as specific activities one does with excellence and which are energising (Buckingham, 2007). As Lopez (2006) notes, strengths-based practices leverage the positive academic and psychological resources of each student.

Although there are several instruments that may help individuals identify areas of strength, one of the most commonly used in American higher education is the *Clifton StrengthsFinder*, a web-based assessment released by The Gallup Organization in 1999. More than two million people worldwide have taken this inventory to date (Buckingham, 2007), including over 500,000 students on over 400 college and university campuses nationwide. With strong evidence of construct validity and test-retest reliability over a nine to twelve week period among university students (Schreiner, 2006a), this instrument can be used to assess students at the point of entry to higher education in order to equip them with a sense of their existing talents that can be further developed within their educational careers. A textbook, *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond* (Clifton *et al.*, 2006) is equipped with a code for students to access and use the online instrument. Institutions can also provide students with codes and the book can be downloaded online after they complete the instrument.

The *Clifton StrengthsFinder* (Gallup, 1999) assesses 34 areas of talent, which are defined as 'naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied' (Clifton & Harter, 2003:111), and include ways of processing information, interacting with people, perceiving the world and navigating the environment. Students who complete the online instrument are provided with a report on their top five areas of greatest talent. Combined with knowledge and skills acquired in the learning process, these talents can be developed into strengths utilised to achieve academic as well as personal success (Clifton *et al.*, 2006). It is the investment of effort in acquiring knowledge and skills that develops strengths from the existing talents. Such strengths are abilities to deliver consistent, positive performance in a given activity (Clifton & Harter, 2003).

Excellence thus becomes a central value and goal in a strengths-based approach to learning and development. Such excellence occurs when individuals capitalise on their talents and invest the time and energy needed to excel. Strengths development is a process that can be not only encouraged in first-year students through experiences that deepen their self-awareness, but also intentionally emphasised in and out of the classroom during the pivotal first year. Building strengths is a five-stage process

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consisting of (1) identifying the natural talent themes; (2) affirming those themes with significant others; (3) developing the talent themes by investing energy and effort in acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to complement the existing talents; (4) applying the developed strengths to new or challenging situations, and (5) combining the strengths with other talents the students have, as well as with the talents of other people, to produce excellence. This final phase encourages students to recognise the talents and gifts that others have, and to partner with others to accomplish more than what can be accomplished by any individual. Shushok and Hulme assert that this process of valuing one's own and others' strengths initiates an understanding that 'a life well lived is one lived in interdependence and community' (Shushok & Hulme, 2006:7). This recognition of one's strengths within the greater context of others' strengths also appears to reflect the South African cultural value of *ubuntu*, whereby 'a person is a person through other human beings – I am because you are, you are because we are' (Luthans, Van Wyk & Walumbwa, 2004:515).

A strengths-based approach holds potential for positively impacting student success and persistence for two reasons. First, an awareness of one's strengths has motivational properties that can lead to increased engagement with the academic environment. Such engagement has been shown to impact student success and persistence (Kuh, 2005). The second reason is that a strengths-based approach also has the capacity to increase a student's range of intellectual behaviours that can be applied to the academic arena. This cognitive capacity arises from the positive emotions that emerge as one learns about talents that already exist within oneself and can be productively applied in order to succeed. Such positive emotions broaden students' creative thinking, complex problem solving, and higher-order thinking and build their coping skills and resources for addressing problems in the future (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005). However, this cognitive capacity also arises from the specific ways in which students' talents and strengths can be used to address challenges and reach goals. By learning of their top five areas of talent and how to use those areas of talent in new situations, students gain awareness of at least five new ways of thinking about their goals and how to reach them (Lopez, 2006).

Outcomes of strengths-based approaches to higher education

There are a number of positive outcomes that have been demonstrated empirically through the use of the StrengthsQuest programme. The first of these is increased student engagement in the learning process. Engaged learning is 'a positive energy invested in one's own learning, evidenced by meaningful processing, attention to what is happening in the moment, and participation in learning activities' (Schreiner & Louis, 2006:6). In a pretest-posttest control group design for an entire semester of a required Public Speaking class taught to first-year students, Cantwell (2005) demonstrated that a strengths-based approach to teaching the class had significantly positive effects on students' engaged learning, exam scores, speech competencies, and overall satisfaction with their college experience. Students in the strengths-based section of the course took the *Clifton StrengthsFinder* outside of class, journaled about

their results, utilised their results as they formed learning teams and completed group projects, and received feedback from the instructor that reinforced the use of their talents. Students in the control group received the same course content, but rather than learning about their strengths, they learned about skills that would help first-year students be successful, such as time management. They participated in group projects and learning teams, but not based on their strengths themes. They received reinforcement from their instructor, but it was not specifically about how they applied their strengths. The significant differences between the two course sections provided preliminary evidence that a strengths-based approach could impact these important learning outcomes.

The second outcome of strengths-based interventions is a positive impact on academic self-efficacy. Academic self-efficacy is students' perception that they are capable of achieving academic success; it is significantly related to students' grade point average, persistence, and personal adjustment (Chemers, Hu & Garcia, 2001). In a pretest-posttest control group design of over 900 students in a first-year seminar at a private liberal arts university in the western United States, students randomly assigned to the strengths-based section of the course reported significantly higher levels of academic self-efficacy than did those in the control section, even after taking into consideration their pre-existing levels of academic self-efficacy at the beginning of the course (Schreiner, 2006b).

The third positive outcome seen in strengths-based interventions with first-year students is in their levels of perceived academic control, which is a construct that encompasses students' beliefs about whether they possess certain attributes needed for academic success and whether these qualities will make a difference in their scholastic performance (Perry *et al.*, 2005). Perceived academic control is a particularly relevant issue for first-year students, as the demands associated with the transition into higher education can create perceptions that one has little control and because student differences in levels of perceived academic control are most pronounced at this time (Perry *et al.*, 2005). Students with higher levels of academic control tend to exert greater effort and obtain higher grades than their peers who have lower levels of academic control. As strengths-based approaches focus on the personal resources that students have at their disposal to address the challenges they face, Louis (2008) designed a study to discover whether students randomly assigned to a strengths-based section of a first-year course would exhibit significantly different levels of perceived academic control than students in the regular curriculum of the course. The results indicated that the perceived academic control reported by students in the waiting-list control sections dropped significantly over the course of the semester, while the perceived academic control of students in the strengths-based sections slightly increased. Even more notable was that when the control sections received the strengths-based curriculum their levels of perceived academic control increased significantly. Thus it appears that a strengths-based approach has the capacity to bolster academic control and to infuse it in students within whom it had been flagging.

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In addition to engagement, academic self-efficacy and perceived academic control, strengths-based approaches also promote first-year student success by impacting students' levels of hope. Hope reflects students' perceptions of their ability to conceptualise goals. It consists of *pathways thinking*, or specific strategies for reaching the goal, and *agency thinking*, which 'initiates and sustains the motivation for using those strategies' (Lopez, Snyder, Magyar-Moe, Edwards, Pedrotti, Janowski, Turner & Pressgrove, 2004:388). University students high in hope are more confident, energised, and think more positively about their goals than do those who report low levels of hope. Hope is also predictive of academic achievement, as measured by grade point average (Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams & Wiklund, 2002) and postsecondary graduation rates (Snyder, Rand & Sigmon, 2002).

Hope theorists believe that students' views of themselves as being capable of initiating and implementing strategies to achieve their goals is an essential component of hope (Lopez *et al.*, 2004); identifying personal talents may help in this process. A study of at-risk first-year students by Gomez and Schreiner (2008) in a regional state university in the US found that students in the strengths-based section of a required study skills course reported significantly higher levels of hope at the end of the semester when compared to those in the traditional study skills section, even after controlling for pre-existing levels of hope at the beginning of the course. This capacity for generating hope in students who were at high risk of academic failure and for leaving university holds promise for other students in transition. These are students who may find themselves uncertain of what the future holds for them and are unsure of their ability to reach their goals. Helping such students recognise, nurture, and develop their strengths provides them with both the *willpower* and the *waypower* (Snyder, 2000) for realising their dreams. When students understand that strengths establish their pathways to goals (Lopez, 2004), and that the college experience provides the specific venues, knowledge, and skills they need to reach their destinations, they are more likely to internalise the behaviours necessary for full engagement in the college experience.

Taken together, these positive effects on first-year students' engaged learning, academic self-efficacy, perceived academic control, and levels of hope indicate that strengths-based approaches to the first-year experience are worth consideration as educators plan these programmes. By including strengths-based assessments and communicating to first-year students that they have within themselves the ingredients for success, educators can emphasise that there are effective strategies that can be learned in order to achieve that success. Both messages are important for students to hear: that they have within themselves the seeds of academic success, and that it is up to them to invest the energy and effort to develop those seeds into the strengths that will enable them to reach their goals at levels of personal excellence.

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