

The Strengths to Succeed

**Research on Strategies to Enhance
Student Success in the First Year**

*Laurie A. Schreiner, Ph.D.
Azusa Pacific University
FYE Conference 2009*

Before we jump in ...

In pairs...



Spend a few minutes each describing:

What do you love about your work?

Just think about...



What if every student could experience that same feeling on your campus?

What if students experienced that same fulfillment of being at their best *while learning*?



The success of an institution and the success of its students are inseparable.

Higher Education's Track Record

- Only about half of students who start college finish with a degree
- Low-income, African-American, Native American, and Latino/a students are less than half as likely to graduate as Asian, Caucasian, and high-income students

An Increase in Diverse Learners

- 80% of the growth in new student enrollments in the next decade will come from low-income students and students of color
- Diverse learning styles and needs of students
- A key advantage will be the ability to help diverse learners capitalize on the talents they bring to the learning environment



What gets in the way of student success?

Students' Beliefs Affect Their Success

The question:

- What does it take to succeed?
- Do I have what it takes to succeed?
- Do I care?
- Does anyone else care?
- Do I belong here?

Negative answers result in

- Floundering
- Avoiding
- Disengaging

Students' Beliefs Affect Their Success

The question:

- What does it take to succeed?
- Do I have what it takes to succeed?
- Do I care?
- Does anyone else care? Do I belong here?

Construct

- Perceived Academic Control
- Academic Self-Efficacy and Mindset
- Motivation → Engagement
- Psychological Sense of Community

These four variables are important predictors of student success:

- **Perceived academic control**
- **Academic self-efficacy and mindset**
- **Motivation**—especially to engage in the learning process!
- **Psychological sense of community**

Perceived Academic Control

- Students' beliefs about their ability to influence academic outcomes (Perry, 2003)
- Often declines during major transitions
- Predictive of:
 - motivation for academic work
 - quality & duration of effort
 - academic achievement
 - persistence, dropped courses

Academic Self-Efficacy

High self-efficacy → approach a task → persist in face of obstacles → more likely to succeed

Low self-efficacy → avoid a task → quit when it gets tough → fail

Bandura, 1997

Mindset



FIXED MINDSET

Intelligence is something very basic about a person that can't be changed very much

GROWTH MINDSET

You can always change how intelligent you are

Dweck, 2006

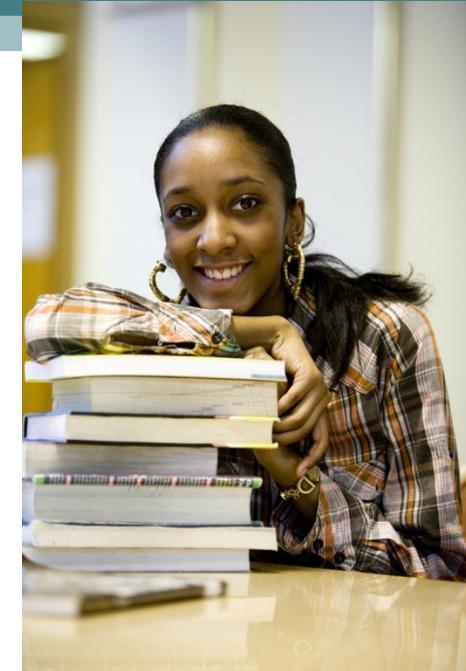
	Fixed Mindset	Growth Mindset
Goals	Performance	Learning
Role of Effort	Avoid it—if you have to try, you’re not smart	Plan on it—it’s how you learn
Enjoyment	Only if I’m good at it	Love the challenge
Attributions for failure	“I’m not good at that subject”	“I didn’t invest the right effort”
Strategies for success	Defensive, avoid failure at all costs	Mastery-oriented and positive

Motivation

- Motivation directs energy – it is the *fuel* that sustains effort
 - We are motivated to pursue goals we expect we can achieve (Hope)
 - We are motivated to engage in activities we value or to work toward goals that we value
- Predictive of academic performance and persistence

Engaged Learning

- Meaningful Processing
- Focused Attention
- Active Participation



“I’m energized by learning”

Predicts grades, satisfaction, and intent to graduate

A strengths development approach can significantly improve ALL of these variables that impact student success

Strengths Philosophy

“Individuals gain more when they build on their talents, than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness.”

--Clifton & Harter, 2003, p. 112

Strengths: Not Just ‘What You’re Good At’!

Strengths lead to success, but they also

- Energize you – they “strengthen” you
- Fulfill a need within you
- Create positive emotions which open up the channels for learning and complex problem solving
- Lead to greater investment of time and effort because they are self-reinforcing

What Are Strengths?

Talent x (Knowledge + Skills)

=

Strengths

Start with Talent

... a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied.

--Clifton & Harter, 2003

Ways of processing information

Ways of interacting with people

Ways of seeing the world

Habits, behaviors, or beliefs that lead to greater effectiveness

Methods to Identify Talent

- Questions to ask students:
 - What did you learn with the greatest ease in high school?
 - What did your teachers compliment you about?
 - What do your friends say they like best about you?
 - What was your favorite assignment?
 - What subjects do you enjoy studying the most?
 - What fascinates you?
 - Tell me about a time in your life when you accomplished something you were proud of.
- Previous successes, things that seem to come naturally, learning that occurs with little effort – all are indicators of talents that can be developed into strengths
- Instruments specifically designed to measure talents

Outcomes from Using an Instrument to Identify Talents

- Provides a common language to talk about talents
- Validates and affirms students' experiences
- Jumpstarts the conversation and provides a springboard for discussion

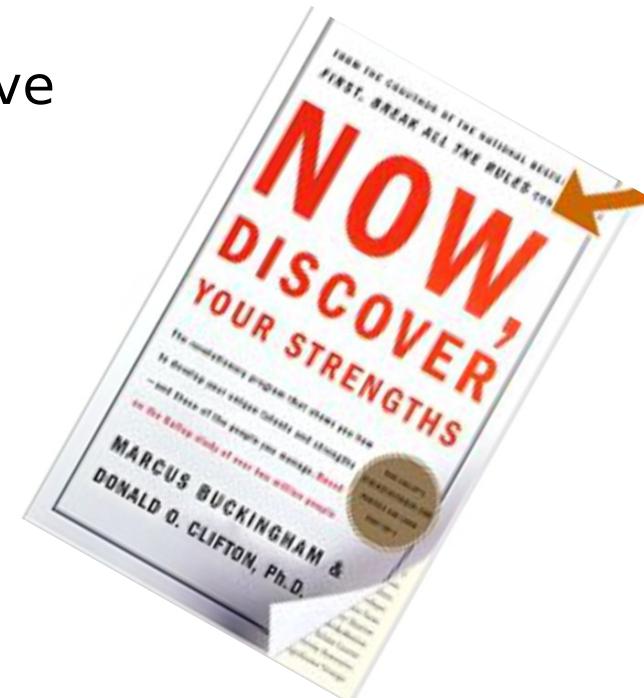
Strengths Finder Development

“What would happen if we studied what was *right* with people?”

Don Clifton

The Gallup Organization launched a massive study of excellence in various types of organizations.

- Conducted over two million interviews of the “best of the best”
- In a wide variety of occupations

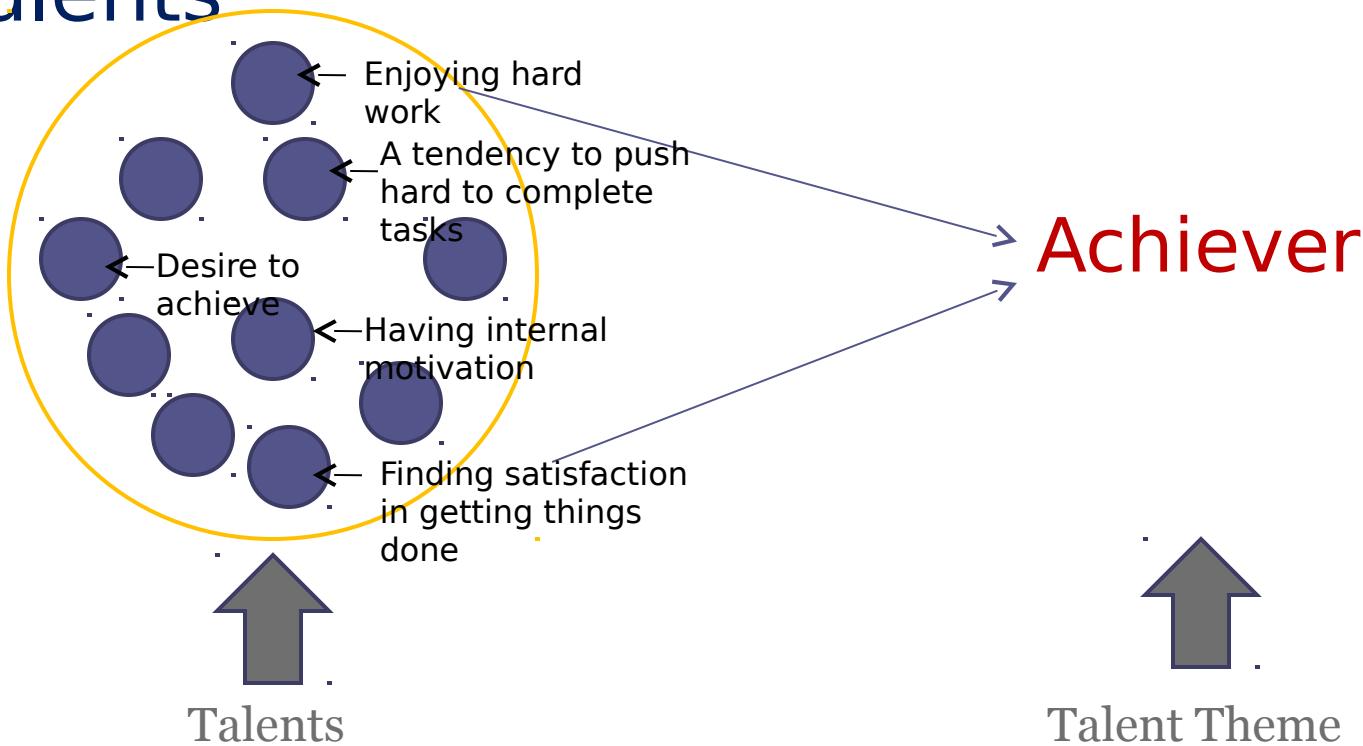


Clifton StrengthsFinder

- Online instrument
- Identifies **5 signature themes of talent** that can be developed into strengths
- 34 possible themes
- Used with over 4 million people in 17 languages – and 300,000 college students

The *Clifton StrengthsFinder* Measures Themes of Greatest Talent

A talent theme is a group of similar talents



Develop Strengths

By refining our dominant talents with **skill** and **knowledge**, we can create strength: the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity.

--Clifton & Harter, 2003

An example of strength development

Strength: A point guard who consistently gets the ball to the open player to score

I

N

V

E

S

T

M

E

N

Skills

Basics of dribbling, rebounding, and shooting

Knowledge

Understanding the basic rules of basketball

Experiences

Going to basketball camp

Investing full effort at practice

T

Talent themes

Focus

Strategic

Adaptability

Ability to fully in the concentrate

Having Plan B

Being moment

Reading the defense

But what about weaknesses?

- Difference between a “non-strength” and a “weakness”
- Weaknesses interfere with your own ability to perform to expected levels—or interfere with others’ ability to do their work
- We can teach students to apply their talent themes to areas in need of improvement (ex: a failing student with “relational” talents)

The Basics of Strengths Development Programs

- Identification of talents
- Affirmation and ownership of those talents
- Envisioning the self one wants to become
- Planning for that future and developing strengths (multiplying talents with skills and knowledge)
- Applying talents and strengths to new situations as well as to challenges

Important Aspects That Few Do

- How my talent themes affect others
- How to work with others on teams
- How to capitalize on my talents in specific situations
- Strengths approaches woven into existing best practices and content
- Multiple “touches” – and longer-term follow-up

The Focus Changes

FROM

- Problems
- Attendance
- Preparation
- Putting into the student
- Average

TO

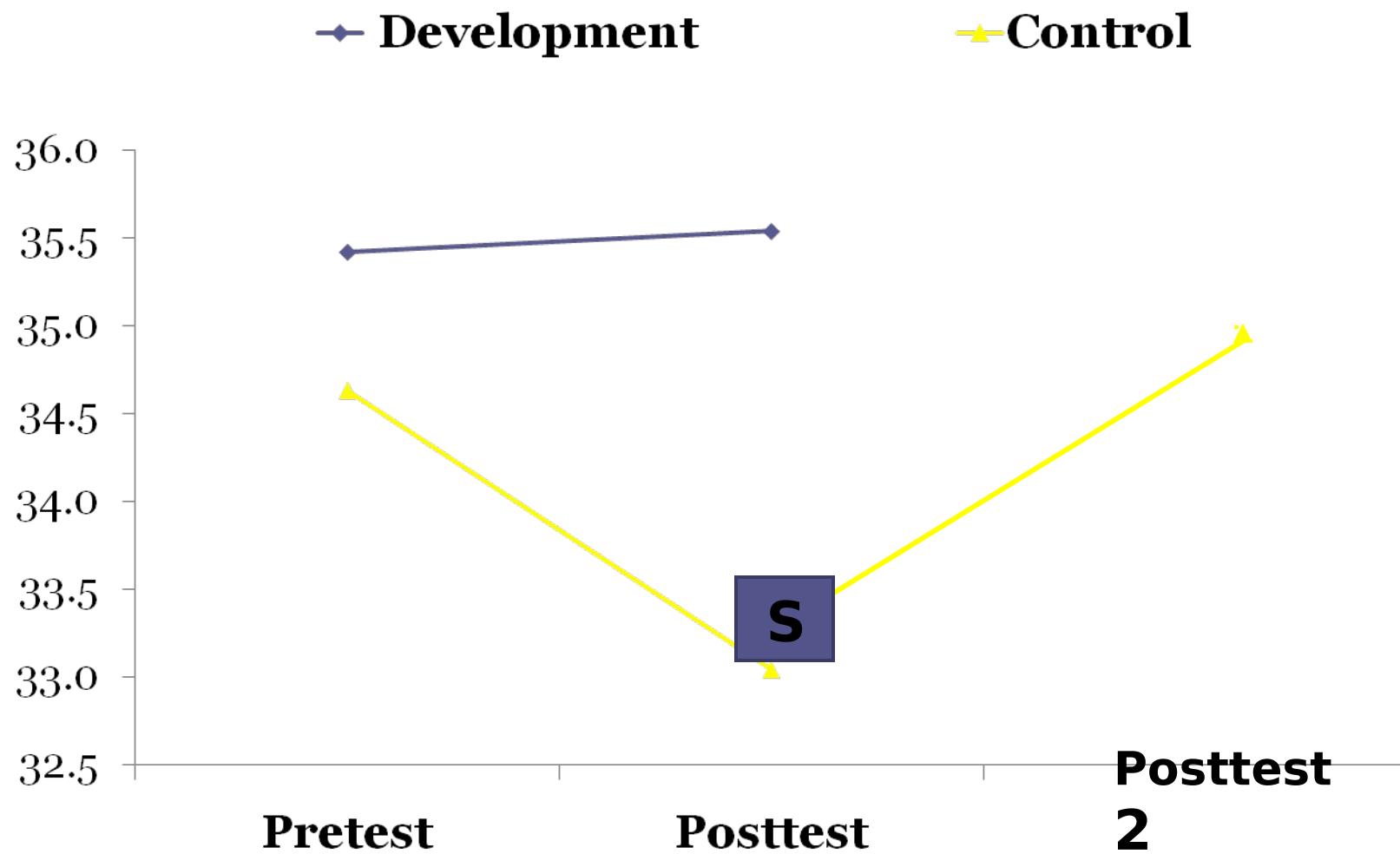
- Possibilities
- Engagement
- Motivation
- Drawing out from the student
- Excellence

How Strengths Development Programs Affect Student Success

- Strengths awareness → strategies for success within them
perceived academic control and ***academic self-efficacy***
- The specific strengths → pathways for achieving their goals →
hope
- Strengths development → ***growth mindset*** that emphasizes the important role of investing effort
- Connect strengths with who they are and how they learn
→***Motivation*** and ***Engaged Learning***
- Learn others' strengths → ***psychological sense of community***

Impact of Strengths Intervention on Perceived Academic Control

(Louis, 2008)

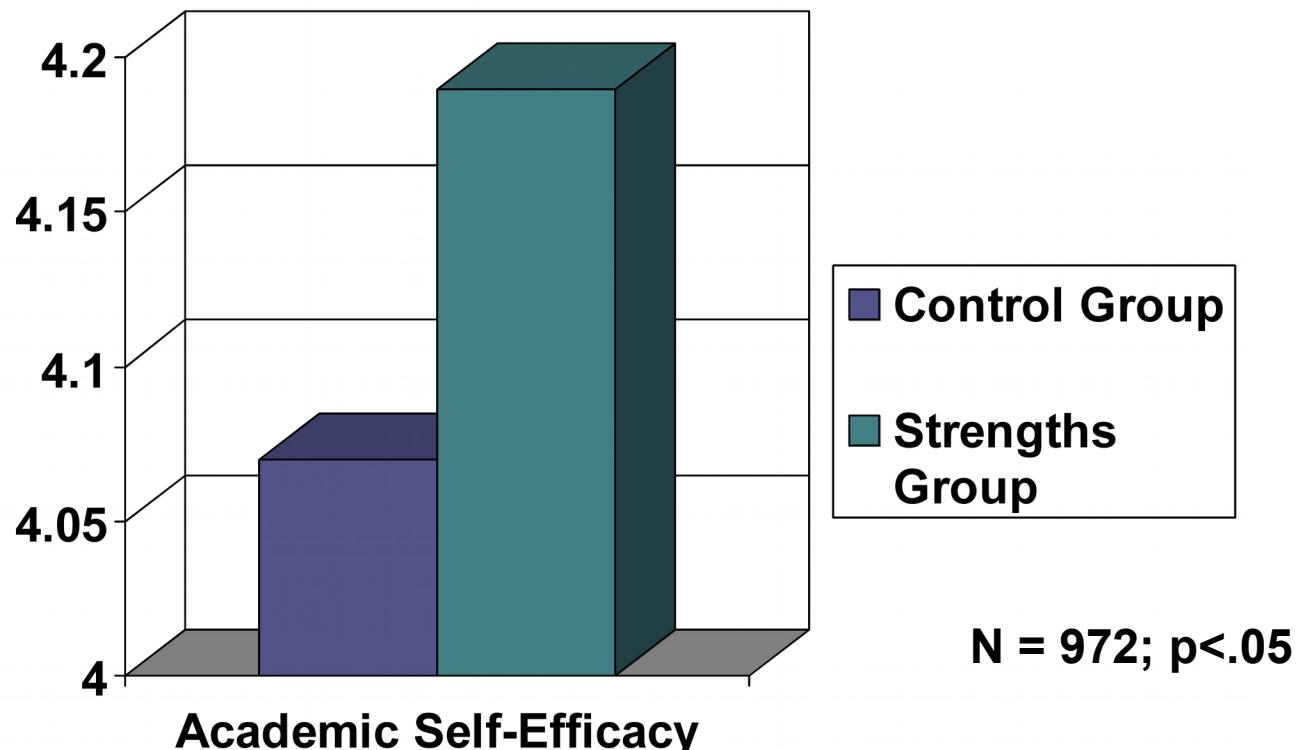


Academic Self-Efficacy

- Students' perception that they are capable of achieving academic success – they know how to take notes, pass tests, study, schedule their time, and write papers
- Significantly related to GPA, persistence, and personal adjustment

Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001

First-Year Students at Azusa Pacific University



Schreiner, 2004

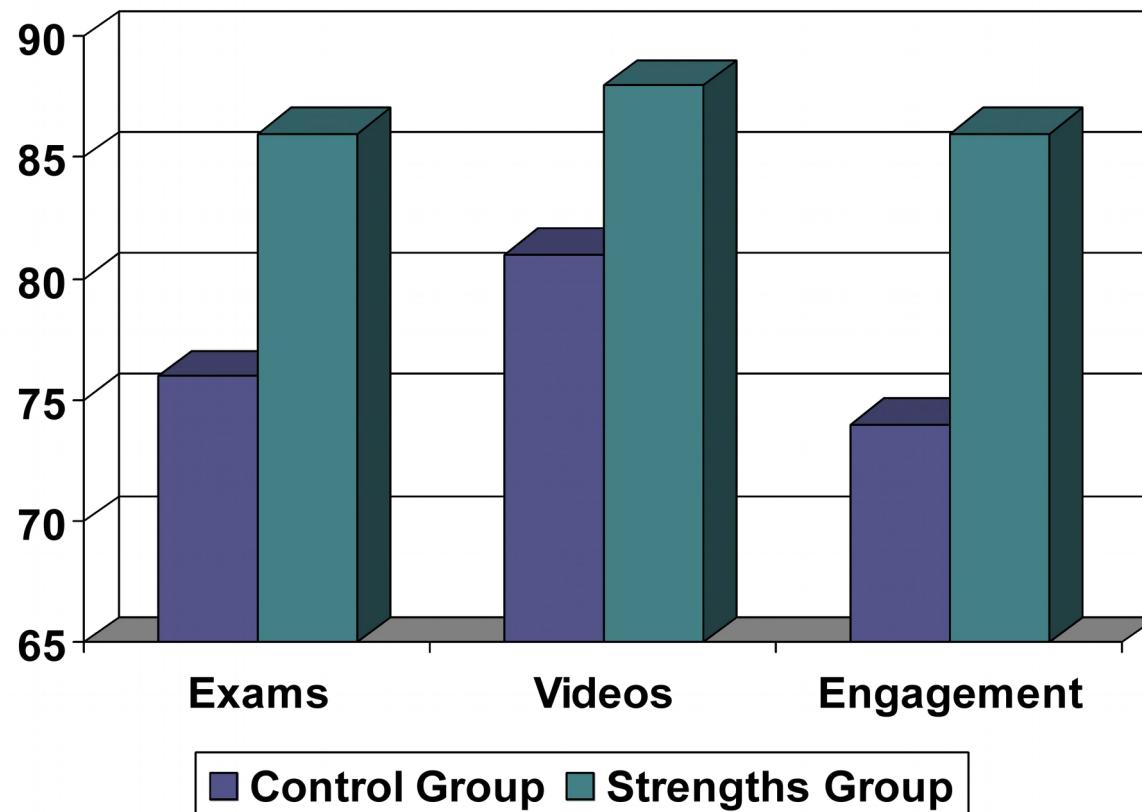
Strengths Development and Engaged Learning

- In first-year students, 14% of the variation in *Engaged Learning Index* scores can be accounted for by strengths variables:
 - Applying strengths to academic tasks
 - Learning study habits that capitalize on their strengths
 - Reporting that their strengths help them do what they do best
- In sophomores, learning to apply their strengths to achieve academic success explains 12-15% of the variance in engaged learning

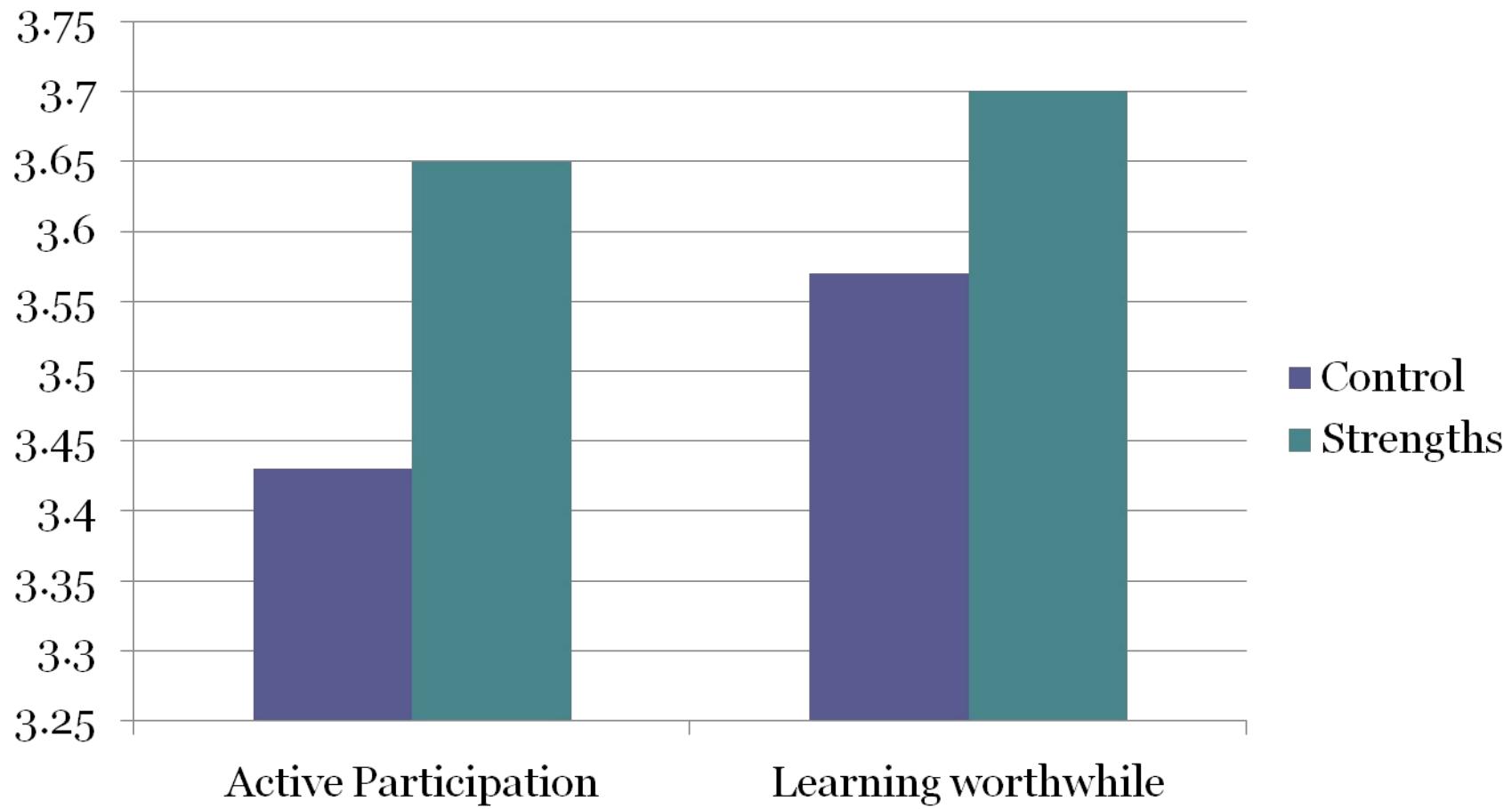
(Schreiner, 2008)

Strengths-Based Learning

Cantwell, 2005



And in at-risk first-year students...



Hope

- GPA = Goals + Pathways + Agency
- Students with high hope are more likely to graduate from college and to get better grades

Hope

- **GPA =**
Goals thinking
Pathways Thinking
Agency Thinking



“I have a realistic goal, am motivated to reach it, and know how to do so”

Predicts grades and intent to graduate

Strengths Development and Hope

- Controlled study of at-risk first-year students
 - Pathways Hope was significantly higher in the strengths development group
- Longitudinal study of first-year students
 - Hope scores were highly predictive of grades and reenrollment as sophomores
 - Strengths ownership predicted Hope scores

Sense of Community



- Membership
- Ownership
- Relationship
- Partnership

“I feel like I belong here and have a contribution to make”

**Predicts grades
and intent to
graduate**

Sense of Community in a Private University

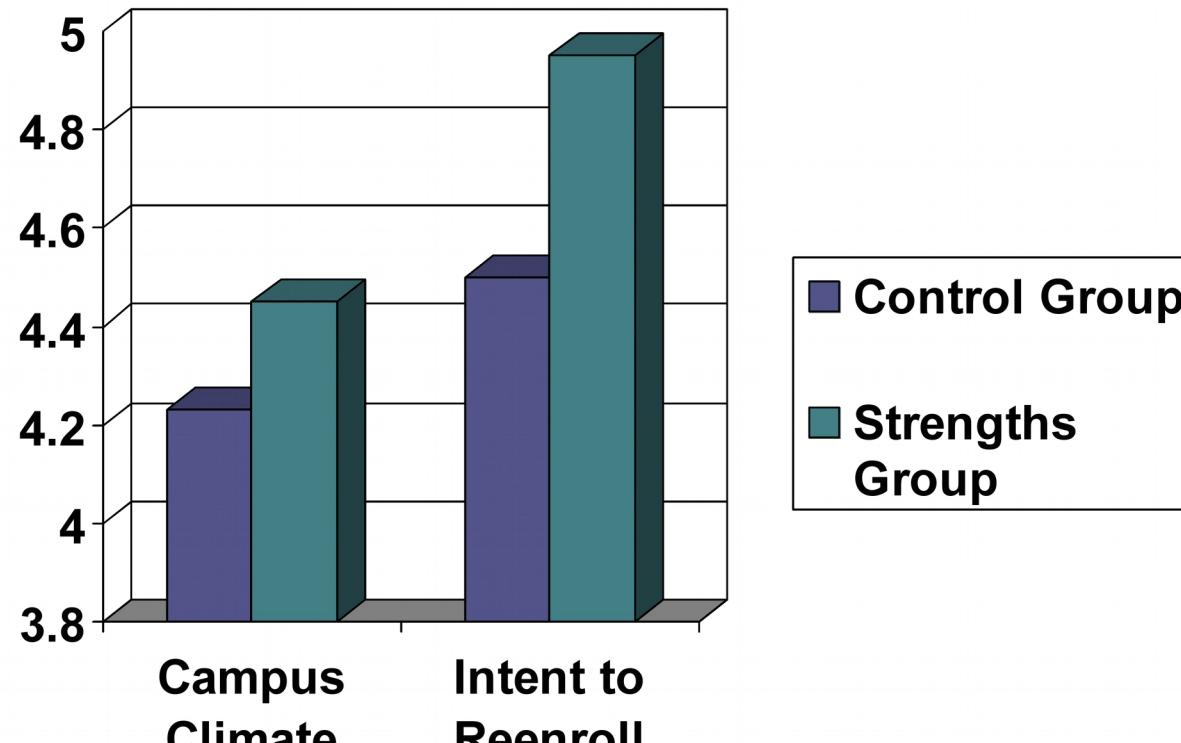
- Highly predictive of grades, overall satisfaction with college, and reenrollment as sophomores

Learning to apply strengths to academic tasks

+

believing that their strengths helped them do what they do best → high sense of community

Sense of Community on a Two-Year Commuter Campus



$p < .000$; Schreiner,
2008

Student Satisfaction

- Three controlled studies
 - Cantwell (2005) – first-year Public Speaking course
 - Schreiner, et al (2006) – first-year seminar
 - Gomez (2008) – first-year seminar with at-risk students
- Significant differences between strengths groups and control groups in:
 - Overall satisfaction with the college experience
 - Course satisfaction

Strengths Development → Student Success

- Encourages a **growth mindset**
- Fosters **academic self-efficacy** & **hope**
- Promotes **engaged learning**
- Helps students maintain a sense of **control** over academic outcomes
- Builds a **sense of community**



Implications for Practice

- Emphasize strengths *development* beyond mere identification and affirmation of talent
- Not the *presence* of talent, but the *productive use* of it produces success!

I think when you know who you are and you have a good grasp on that, you can be okay even with what are not your strengths--because other people have those strengths and you can learn how to work well with other people and say okay, I have this weakness, but that's your strength. And so we can kind of team together, and good things happen....

--First-year student

For more information



The Noel Strengths Academy

Engaging Learners, Inspiring Leaders

www.apu.edu/strengthsacademy

lschreiner@apu.edu