

# Using Hope Theory to

Transform a  
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Experience

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Based

# Using Hope Theory to Transform a Strengths-Based Freshman Seminar

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## Abstract:

The processes of identifying and using strengths engage students in resolving issues of identity, building self-efficacy, and gaining knowledge and skills necessary to promote meaningful personal, professional, and academic achievement. When strengths-based teaching is combined with course activities built around the tenets of *hope theory* (Lopez, et al 2009; Snyder, 1991) the experience becomes even more meaningful, as hope has been observed as a greater predictor of academic success than SES, IQ, standardized test scores, high school GPA, and a number of other factors. This poster highlights the preliminary findings of a study in which pre/post surveys analyze changes in students' levels of hope and well-being upon completion of a freshman seminar course designed to foster development of both strengths and hope.

## Purpose and Significance:

Finding a sense of purpose and identity are crucial developmental tasks associated with late adolescence/early adulthood. This study attempts to address these issues by identifying how a freshman seminar can support the identification, development, and use of strengths, while simultaneously contributing to gains in hope, motivation, well-being, and academic achievement.

## Theoretical Framework:

**Hope** can be defined as the ability to clearly and consistently articulate goals (*goals thinking*), develop step-by-step plans to reach those goals (*pathways thinking*), and persevere in spite of obstacles (*agency thinking*) (Lopez, et al., 2009). The culminating student artifact of this freshman seminar—a personalized Action Plan for personal and professional development—provides a framework which activates all three tenets of hope theory. As students gain confidence in setting goals and establishing realistic, concrete steps to reach them, they are more likely to remain motivated and maintain a positive sense of well-being conducive to academic persistence and overall academic achievement.

## Method:

### Participants:

Entering college freshmen (N=19) participating in a strengths-based Human Development freshman seminar at the University of Alabama.

### Procedures:

All students in the Human Development freshman seminar participated by completing surveys assessing well-being, motivation, and hope. Students completed the surveys both as pre-tests (T1) during the introduction to the seminar course, and as post-tests (T2) at the conclusion of the course.

### Materials:

Students completed Gallup's StrengthsQuest inventory and accompanying activities designed to affirm and hone individual talents and strengths. Additionally, students engaged in reflective writing and discussion to describe progressive gains in understanding of their own developing strengths and the process of refining plans and goals. The culminating student artifact—a personalized Action Plan for personal and professional development, then becomes a living document detailing anticipated steps and timelines for the attainment of goals; strategies for ongoing refinement of signature strengths; and awareness of resources and sources of support needed to sustain motivation in their personal and professional endeavors.

### Analysis and Preliminary Findings:

Paired-samples t-tests comparing results from (T1) to (T2) revealed increases in students' experiences of *hope, optimism, positive coping, positive affect, and gratitude*, with decreases observed in mean scores for *negative affect and negative coping*. Preliminary findings do seem to suggest that it is possible to indeed *build hope* within students, and that a strengths approach may intensify the effects of this process.

## Results:

Students demonstrated a statistically significant increase in strengths self efficacy and hope, specifically, pathways thinking. Post-tests also indicated students were less likely to use self-criticism and more likely to initiate action to find ways to solve problems. At the end of the course, students with high hope were more likely to report positive feelings such as interest, excitement, enthusiasm, and determination.

## Recommendations for Research and Practice:

Intended steps for further study include collection and evaluation of qualitative data including interviews, focus groups, and student-generated artifacts, as well as the potential launch of a longitudinal study to follow these students in an effort to document and compare the long-term effects on hope with that of a control group.

Findings indicate promising implications for the combined use of hope theory and strengths in freshman seminars and/or FYE courses as vehicles for empowering students to thrive academically,

effectively use campus resources, and actively pursue their passions, and psychological wellbeing among first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Development*. 51 (2), 180-201.

Komaraju, M., Musulkin, S. & Bhattacharya, G. (2010). Role of student-faculty interactions in developing college students' academic self-concept, motivation, and achievement. *Journal of College Student Development* 51(3), 332-342.

Lopez, S. J., Rose, S., Robinson, C., Margues, S., and Pais-Ribeiro, J. (2009). Measuring and Promoting Hope in School Children. *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools* (pp.35-51). New York, NY: Routledge.

Sawyer, R. K. (2006). The New Science of Learning. In R. K. Sawyer, *The Cambridge handbook of the Learning Sciences* (pp. 1-16). New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

# Tenets of Hope Theory:

*“High hope” individuals (as identified by the Dispositional Hope Scale; Snyder, 1991) regularly operationalize three types of thinking and behavior:*

**Goals Thinking:** consistent emphasis on focused goals for the future

**Pathways Thinking:** belief in one’s capacity to generate routes toward a goal

**Agency Thinking:** belief in one’s capacity to initiate and sustain actions

Snyder, C. R., Sympson, S. C., Ybasco, F. C., Borders, T. F., Babyak, M. A., Higgins, R. L. (1996). Development and validation of the state hope scale. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 70(2), 321-335.

# Can Hope Predict Student

## Success?

Lopez, Rose, Robinson, Marques, & Pais-Ribeiro (2009) found hope to be a **stronger predictor of success** than:

- IQ
- Prior grades
- SAT/ACT scores
- Socioeconomic status

Lopez, S. J., Rose, S., Robinson, C., Marques, S. C., & Pais-Ribeiro, J. (2009). Measuring and promoting hope in schoolchildren. In R. Gilman, E. S. Huebner, & M. J. Furlong (Eds.), *Handbook of Positive Psychology in Schools* (37-50). New York: Routledge.

# How we set out to build



Guide students in discovering and developing personal strengths using StrengthsQuest;



Assist students in exploring interests and utilizing campus resources;



Coach students in developing a personal Action Plan for developing strengths and pursuing goals.



# Action Plan Components

## □ **Who am I?**

- Strengths, Personality (MBTI)
- Interests, Hobbies, Values
- **Goals**

## □ **Where do I want to go in life?**

- Goals developed into **pathways**
- What is my motivation? How will my strengths be instrumental in my success (**agency**)?

Our philosophy: Strengths help us find our **fit**, and then become a **vehicle** for the attainment of goals.

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# References

Bowman, N. (2010). The development of psychological wellbeing among first-year college students. *Journal of College Student Development*. 51 (2), 180-201.

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