

Spotlight on ILA Institutional Members

ILA Members are doing amazing leadership work around the world, from starting new degree programs to nurturing young people who make a difference, from running innovative workshops and seminars to fostering organizational change. We are pleased to shine an ILA spotlight on the programs of our members. If you would like to nominate yourself or another ILA institutional member to be featured on these pages, please contact ILA at ila@ila-net.org.

Spotlight on Azusa Pacific University:

Modeling a Paradigm Shift in Higher Education: Strengths-Based Leadership and Education

Forty miles northeast of Los Angeles, a revolution is brewing at Azusa Pacific University (APU). Home to nearly 9,000 students, and offering 22 master's degree programs and seven doctoral programs, the university has made a commitment to become a "strengths-based campus." Rooted in the confidence that each person's natural abilities and talents provide clues to those areas of potential peak performance and greatest satisfaction, this paradigm shift in higher education offers an alternative to the prevalent "deficit-remediation" model that leaves many students unmotivated and disengaged during the college years.

As part of APU's commitment to modeling a strengths-based approach to higher education, the university's doctoral programs in Higher Education have stepped up to become the first Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs in the United States to take a strengths-based approach to preparing future higher education leadership.

The format for these doctoral programs is designed to serve the needs of working professionals. The 60+ doctoral students—almost all of whom work full-time in administrative roles in colleges and universities across the U.S. and around the world—bring real-world experience to their classes and apply their learning immediately into their professional settings. The program format combines Web-based learning 11 months of the year with four weeks of on-campus classes (two weeks in early January; two weeks in mid-July).

Research emerging from the Ed.D. and

Ph.D. programs explores the effectiveness of strengths-based approaches to leadership and education, also examining issues of gender in leadership and effective team-building. A distinctive contribution of faculty and student research is an emphasis on student success—focusing on engaged learning and what contributes to students "thriving" throughout the college experience. Collaborative research on these topics is the focus of attention by faculty-led research teams involving Ph.D. students.

The Impact of a Strengths-Based Approach on Doctoral Students

Ed.D. and Ph.D. students enrolled in these programs not only learn how to identify and leverage their natural talents to excel professionally, they also learn how to bring out the best in students and colleagues on their home campuses. As a result, the program content has a beneficial impact on the professional lives of students both in terms of daily responsibilities and on their perspective as administrative leaders. The continuous interplay between theory and practice, building bridges between coursework and professional responsibilities, contributes both to stimulating class discussions and to students becoming more effective employees in their professional settings.

When students are asked for their feedback on APU's doctoral programs, they frequently mention the benefits of the cohort model and the accessibility of the doctoral faculty. Approximately 18-20 new students are admitted into the Ed.D. and Ph.D. programs each July; the incoming cohort takes foundational courses



APU Doctoral Students, Class Photo

together throughout the first year. The seven faculty who teach in the program are accessible to students, mentoring them, partnering with them in research, and guiding their development as leaders in higher education.

Students find that they can apply what they learn in classes immediately in their professional responsibilities on their own campuses. In addition, assignments for coursework often draw directly from the students' home campus responsibilities. Joretta Nelson, Vice President for Enrollment Management at Brevard College notes, "While I am a lifelong student, I am a practical one as well. I appreciated the integrity and excellence of the program, balanced by the connections that are required by my current role. Not one day goes by that I don't apply something. This program has really pushed me further than I ever thought possible."

A Strengths-Based Approach: What's Distinctive?

APU's work to equip academicians for strengths-based leadership and educa-

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tion builds upon the latest research from the positive psychology movement launched by Martin Seligman, as well as the related field of positive organizational scholarship. In short, a strengths-based approach to leadership and education is grounded in the conviction that the highest levels of life satisfaction, productivity, and leadership effectiveness occur when individuals spend most of their time in their areas of strength—those areas that energize a person, where excellence is almost effortless, and where time seems to fly (or stand still!). These areas of strength develop when individuals recognize their predispositions of talent and nurture those talents with skill and knowledge into excellence in a specific area.

Both the corporate world and higher education are exploring the implications of a strengths-based approach to productivity and human flourishing. For example, over 2.5 million people have identified their talent patterns through the web-based *Clifton StrengthsFinder* instrument, largely through books such as Buckingham and Clifton's *Now, Discover Your Strengths* and Rath's *StrengthsFinder 2.0*.

Colleges and universities have an awesome responsibility to their students' futures. This means putting laser focus on helping each student learn, achieve, and build self-confidence in a caring environment. In addition, this requires consciously helping them discover, develop, and practice their talents that are not measured by ACT/SAT tests of physical/artistic performance. My dream, my hope, my urging, is that today's public policy leaders and decision-makers get serious about educational reform. It can only happen if we get dead serious about seeing students in terms of what they can do instead of what they cannot.
 – Lee Noel, Ph.D., Co-Founder, Noel-Levitz, Inc.

work of Clifton and Edward C. Anderson to produce an updated edition of *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond*. According to Gallup tracking, orders for at least ten copies of *StrengthsQuest* have been received from over 2,000 colleges and universities nationwide. Thus far, more than 200 postsecondary institutions are comprehensively incorporating a strengths-based approach in curricular and/or co-curricular programs with college students.

As the “Strengths Revolution” spreads, APU is committed to modeling best practices and contributing to the research base that provides a solid foundation to this international movement.

APU's Noel Academy for Strengths-Based Leadership and Education

Providing oversight to the strengths emphasis at APU is the recently-launched Noel Academy for Strengths-Based Leadership and Education. Established with supportive funding from Dr. Lee Noel, co-founder of the higher education consulting firm Noel-Levitz, Inc., and his wife Mary, the Academy's work is changing the way higher education views its mission—to a perspective committed to “seeing students in terms of what they can do instead of what they cannot” (see sidebar).

The Academy serves as a clearinghouse for research conducted on a variety of strengths approaches in higher education, including use of Gallup's *Clifton StrengthsFinder* instrument. Fueled by graduate research assistants and faculty scholars, the Academy coordinates strengths-related research projects at APU and on other campuses both nationally and internationally.

From first-year experience courses to



Student Study Tour in Wales & England Pauses Before Welsh Assembly

faculty/staff development initiatives, the Academy translates cutting-edge research into viable strengths-oriented programming. By focusing on the strengths and talents that are unique in each individual, students are motivated and energized in new and meaningful ways. The Academy exists to bring that revolutionary perspective into the higher education arena.

Additionally, the work of the Academy reaches far beyond the walls of academia. The development of a strengths-oriented leadership model and the emergence of interventions focused on the development of psychological capital have begun to have a significant impact on the way organizations function.

Dr. Eileen Hulme, Executive Director of the Noel Academy for Strengths-Based Leadership and Education, reflects on the conviction undergirding her enthusiasm for a strengths-based approach to life and work: “Each person has within themselves the power to change the world for good. Yet, for the most part we are not convinced of this reality. Discovering individual strengths and talents that nourish the heart and mind is the key to energizing our collective creative potential.”

For information about APU's Doctoral Programs in Higher Education, visit: www.apu.edu/bas/highered
 To see a four-minute clip about the vision behind the APU's Noel Academy for Strengths-Based Leadership and Education, visit: www.apu.edu/strengthsacademy



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