

*How do we engage our students in their own learning process?*

*In the second of a three-part series, Laurie Schreiner shares practical, research-based suggestions for fostering the curiosity and mindfulness of all of our students.*

*By Laurie A. Schreiner*

# Thriving in the Classroom

**Y**OU'VE HAD THEM IN CLASS or have worked with them in student organizations on campus: those students who are energized by learning—attentive, open, actively involved in the moment. They talk to others about what they are learning in class, they ask questions and are curious about the connections between ideas, they bring in new things they've learned on their own. You notice them because they stand in such sharp contrast to their peers who just show up and do what they need to make the grade, and whose most frequent question in class is "Will this be on the test?"

It was just this distinction that I noticed between Angela and Carla, the two Latina students whose story I told in the last issue of *About Campus*. Although both had graduated and were considered "successes" by common standards in higher education, there was a qualitative difference between the two young women in how they navigated and benefited from their college experience. Observing this difference led me toward the construct of *thriving*—the term I've used to describe college students who are fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Thriving students are get-

ting the most out of their college experience: they are succeeding academically, energized by the learning process, setting and achieving goals that are important to them, managing themselves and the demands of college, involved in healthy relationships and connected to supportive communities, open and appreciative of differences, desiring to make a contribution to the world, having a positive outlook on life and the future, and enjoying their college experience.

In the last issue of *About Campus*, I outlined the research studies that I presented with Eric J. McIntosh, Denise Nelson, and Shannon Pothovenin in 2009, which led to the creation of the Thriving Quotient, a reliable and valid 35-item instrument that measures the changeable psychological qualities in students that affect their ability to optimize their college experience. Students' thriving academically, interpersonally, and intrapersonally was described, with a particular emphasis on the "positive perspective" element of thriving that forms a psychological foundation for student success. In this second of a three-part series, my focus is on the academic component of thriving.

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# Students who are thriving academically are psychologically engaged in learning and take charge of their own learning process.

## ACADEMIC THRIVING

**ANGELA AND CARLA** had both been students of mine as psychology majors who entered college with an “at risk” label, yet had persisted to graduation. In their senior year of courses, I remembered Angela as an inquisitive learner open to new ideas, a critical thinker and questioner, an avid reader and Internet searcher whose curiosity propelled her into new experiences and a variety of course choices beyond what was required. I also remembered Carla but in less detail. She seemed on the fringes of class, physically present but often psychologically absent. Concerned about her grades, her questions centered on requirements and expectations, and she often sat silently while her peers engaged in class discussions.

The important part of the story about Angela and Carla, however, is that they had started out much the same: worried about their ability to succeed in college, lacking confidence that their high school preparation was sufficient, unsure how to navigate the unfamiliar landscape of a college campus. Both were relatively introverted and shy, and neither had had experiences prior to college that equipped them well for the academic or personal demands of university life. So what had led to such a dramatic difference in the two by the time they were seniors?

The key difference between the two is that Angela became engaged in the learning process and evolved into an active, self-regulated learner, while Carla did not. Angela learned to invest effort to achieve her goals, to be mindful, get involved, and ask good questions. Carla continued to approach learning passively,

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**Laurie A. Schreiner** is a professor and chair of doctoral higher education at Azusa Pacific University in Azusa, California. She is coauthor of the *Student Satisfaction Inventory; StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond*; and *Helping Sophomores Succeed: Understanding and Improving the Second-Year Experience*.

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as an activity whose outcome was under someone else’s control. And that key difference is at the heart of academic thriving: students who are thriving academically are psychologically engaged in learning and take charge of their own learning process.

My research team of doctoral students at Azusa Pacific University has labeled these two facets of academic thriving *engaged learning* and *academic determination*. Together, they account for between 8 and 18 percent of the variation in such important outcomes as grades, learning satisfaction, learning gains while in college, satisfaction with college, and intent to persist to graduation.

## ENGAGED LEARNING

**STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN LEARNING** is a key predictor of many of the benefits that we associate with a college education. Michelle Louis and I have defined engaged learning as “a positive energy invested in one’s own learning, evidenced by meaningful processing, attention to what is happening in the moment, and involvement in learning activities” (p. 9). This type of engagement is predictive of students’ satisfaction not only with the learning process, but also with their entire college experience. Students who are engaged in the learning process are meaningfully processing ideas and connecting them to existing knowledge. They are psychologically present and focused in their attention, as well as behaviorally involved in the classroom dynamics. They are energized by what they are learning, displaying an interest in the content and talking with others outside of class about what they are learning. They ask good questions in class, they explore ideas on their own outside of class, and they often (but not always) actively participate in class discussions. The higher students’ level of engaged learning, the more satisfied they are with the learning process, the more likely they are to interact with faculty outside of class, and the greater learning gains they report while in college.

Our use of the term “engaged learning” is meant to emphasize both the behavioral and psychological aspects of engagement. Too often educators have

focused primarily on what we can see—those “educationally purposeful behaviors” that are measured by instruments such as the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). Although these behaviors are important, they are not the whole story: psychological engagement must go hand in hand with behavioral engagement. As John Bean notes, “[p]articipating in events without committing psychological energy to them indicates that they are unimportant to the student and thus ineffectual in changing the student. . . . Behavior without thought is not likely to lead to the gains associated with engagement” (p. 3). Students may write multiple drafts of papers, attend class regularly, and even participate in class discussions, yet not be psychologically engaged in the learning process—they may be engaging in rote behaviors that are required or expected, rather than processing their learning in meaningful ways.

In our measurement of engaged learning, we have found there are three components to students’ engagement in the learning process: *meaningful processing*, *focused attention*, and *active participation*. We have found that active participation—the part of engaged learning that is directly observable by faculty—is actually the smallest part of engaged learning, accounting for the least variance in students’ scores. Instead, it is the meaningful processing and focused attention that comprise the largest part of engagement in learning—and it is also these aspects of engaged learning that have the smallest gender and racial differences. So the behaviors that faculty normally associate with student engagement—asking questions in class, participating in class discussions, being noticeably involved in classroom learning activities—are in reality only the tip of the iceberg. Much of student engagement is happening internally as students are psychologically processing and responding to the course content.

**Meaningful Processing.** Recalling my own experiences with Angela and Carla in the classroom, it was clear that Angela was fully engaged in the learning process while Carla was more often going through the motions. Angela was engaged in what John Tagg refers

to as “deep learning”; she made connections between what was talked about in class and what she already knew or wanted to know. If she was not naturally interested in the material, she found ways of connecting it to something else in her life she was interested in or curious about. Those connections are the hallmark of deep learning, for they indicate meaningful processing of material to be applied to life rather than rote memorization of facts for regurgitation on a test. This meaningful processing then leads to the creation of more complex knowledge structures—building blocks in the brain that can form the foundation for learning increasingly more difficult concepts.

Carla, on the other hand, was a “surface learner”; that is, she focused on rote memorization of facts rather than on the meaning of the concepts. She tended to be more concerned about what would be on the test than whether she was really learning something in a meaningful way. If the professor was not able to interest her, her mind wandered and she quickly became bored and tuned out of class discussions. Because she was not intentionally or meaningfully processing the content, she tended to confine her learning to the classroom: when class was over, her brain stopped thinking about the material. As a result, she rarely talked about her learning with her friends, hardly ever had conversations with faculty outside of class, and tended to stop studying when she felt she had most of the “right answers” for the test.

**Focused Attention.** In addition to meaningful processing, engaged learning also involves a focused attention to what is happening in the moment—what psychologist Ellen Langer calls *mindfulness* in her 1997 book *The Power of Mindful Learning*. Engaged learners such as Angela are fully in the moment; they are psychologically present in class, noticing what is new and different, able to see different perspectives on an issue. In contrast, students such as Carla who are not engaged in their own learning process may be physically present in class but are psychologically absent—their minds are elsewhere, perhaps processing past memories or anticipating future activities after class is over. Rather than noticing what is new and different, they wait to be

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told what to notice or where to direct their attention, particularly as they look for the one right answer to the problem at hand.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: ENGAGING STUDENTS IN THEIR OWN LEARNING

**T**HERE ARE FOUR MAJOR IMPLICATIONS of our findings about engaged learning and its contribution to student success. The first is that there is more to engagement than what we can see in class—and as educators we need to realize that the absence of some behaviors should not lead us to conclude that our students are disengaged. The second implication is that educators can influence students' engaged learning by how they structure the learning process and how they connect with students. Third, students can be taught strategies for engaging more fully in the learning process, even when instructors or course materials are not inherently interesting. And the final implication is that by partnering together student life professionals and faculty can create seamless learning environments that are highly likely to engage a greater percentage of students on campus.

**Look Beyond Behavior.** The good news of discovering that most of engaged learning cannot be explained by the behaviors that faculty normally see in the classroom is that many of the gender, ethnic, and cultural differences in engagement disappear when our focus turns to meaningful processing and focused attention. Students whose culture has emphasized the power distance between instructor and student may not ask questions in class, yet they are just as likely to be meaningfully processing as the student whose hand is always in the air. Women students who may be silent in a classroom where they are outnumbered by men may be just as focused and psychologically involved as the men who are regularly offering their opinions. And students who are more introverted or who need time to think carefully about their answers before speaking may be just as energized by the learning process as those who “think out loud.” So the implication for educators is to

look beyond behavior, to recognize that the psychological processes are just as critical to student success as are the behaviors—and sometimes even more so.

**Engage Students Intentionally.** The second implication of our findings is that educators can influence students' engagement in learning. By intentionally structuring students' learning experiences, stimulating their interest, and connecting with them in and out of class, engaged learning can be fostered. We know from a review of the research on self-determination theory conducted by psychologists Richard Ryan and Edward Deci that intrinsic motivation blossoms when people's needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness are met. This finding translates to classroom practices that communicate to students that they are capable of mastering the course material, that they have some choices in how they might demonstrate that to the instructor, and that the instructor cares about them and is supportive of them.

There are specific pedagogical practices that increase the likelihood of engaged learning. Instructors can begin by communicating their own passion about the subject matter, as well as their concern for student success and their desire to get to know their students. Asking students to write the instructor a letter on the first day of class in which they describe what will help them learn best is one way of beginning to establish relationships with students that are focused on the learning process. Instructors can use examples and illustrations in class that connect to the personal lives and interests of students; they also can ask students to bring in specific applications of course concepts to their own life situations. The more instructors can connect their course material to concepts students already know, to aspects of their life that are important and meaningful to them, or to important goals in their life that they want to attain, the more likely students are to become engaged in their own learning. Marcia Baxter Magolda and Patricia King emphasize this point in their Learning Partnerships Model, where they encourage educators to “situate learning in the learners' experiences” (p. 41). Actively involving students in class,

## Providing opportunities for students to choose ways of demonstrating their mastery of the course content also enhances the likelihood of engagement, as students are encouraged to play to their strengths and apply course concepts in practical ways to their own life.

through small group discussions, case studies, role playing, and hands-on demonstrations, increases engagement as well. Such active and collaborative learning strategies are found more frequently on campuses where student engagement and persistence to graduation are higher than expected, according to researchers Thomas Nelson Laird, Daniel Chen, and George Kuh. Providing opportunities for students to choose ways of demonstrating their mastery of the course content also enhances the likelihood of engagement, as students are encouraged to play to their strengths and apply course concepts in practical ways to their own life. Finally, the more the classroom becomes a community of learners, the more likely students are to engage in learning as they develop relationships with one another and with the instructor that support their learning but that also challenge them to stretch.

**Teach Students How to Engage.** Engagement in learning is a two-way street; it requires a psychological and social investment from both the teacher and the learner. Although there are strategies educators can use to engage students more intentionally, the reality is that not all instructors will use these practices in class on a regular basis. So students need strategies of their own that they can implement when the professor or course material is not inherently interesting. Teaching students mindfulness is one such strategy. Too often students approach learning on “autopilot”—they go through the motions of attending class, taking notes (and doodling in the margins or surfing the Internet at the same time), and moving their eyes over the text in their assigned readings. Instead, they can be taught to be more fully attending to what is happening in the moment, actively searching for what is new or different in what they are hearing, seeing, or reading, and suspending judgment when they encounter new ideas. Ellen Langer’s 1997 book, *The Power of Mindful Learning*, contains a number of such strategies that students can be taught. Learning to ask good questions is another strategy that can enhance engagement, as is intentionally searching for connections

between what is being taught or read and what else is happening in the student’s life. Thinking about how the material could be applied to personal relationships or to real-life problems can generate a deeper level of interest and meaningful processing within the student, leading to higher levels of engaged learning.

**Create Seamless Learning Environments on Campus.** Many articles in *About Campus* over the years have encouraged the creation of partnerships across student life and academic affairs so that student learning is a seamless experience that extends beyond the walls of the classroom. Our research findings on engaged learning support this strategy as well. One of the best examples of such partnerships are living-learning communities, where faculty interaction is combined with structured residence hall programming to integrate course material with themes in residence life. Cohorts of students taking classes together and living together, with regular faculty contact in and out of class and staff support for both classroom and co-curricular learning experiences provide an ideal environment for engagement, according to a 2009 study by Frank Shushok, Douglas Henry, Glenn Blalock, and Rishi Sriram. When students experience a strong sense of community within a learning environment that extends beyond the walls of the classroom, they grow and develop not only intellectually, but also interpersonally and emotionally. This seamless integration of learning environments, where student affairs educators work closely with faculty and academic support personnel, is the hallmark of educating the whole person—and helps students thrive academically.

### ACADEMIC DETERMINATION

**A**CADEMIC THRIVING is not just about the motivation to engage in learning, but is also about the behaviors and attitudes that enable students to push through challenging times and persist in reaching their academic goals. Engaged learning that is not accompanied by the

self-regulation needed to invest time studying and turn assignments in on time will not result in the maximum benefits of a college education. It is this ability to regulate one's own learning behavior that is measured in the component of academic thriving that we have labeled *academic determination*.

Academic determination contains four aspects that are important to thriving academically: (1) investment of effort, (2) self-regulation, (3) environmental mastery, and (4) goal-directed thinking. Each of these components was evident in Angela and Carla's behaviors throughout college.

**Investment of Effort.** Although both were poorly prepared for college by their high school experiences, Angela learned that effort was the key ingredient in success. She learned to attribute her successes to specific actions and efforts she had taken; she also learned to attribute her failures to her own lack of effort, or to effort expended on the wrong tasks. She began to view mistakes and failure as learning opportunities, as opportunities for important feedback about what she could do differently next time. Carla's view of effort was entirely different: as someone with what psychologist Carol Dweck calls a *fixed mindset*, Carla believed that her poor high school preparation had doomed her to low levels of achievement in college, that she in fact was not very smart and would always struggle just to pass. Students with a fixed mindset view effort as their enemy, for it reminds them that they are not intelligent; after all, if one was truly smart, one would not have to try very hard to succeed. This was the mindset to which Carla subscribed: effort was to be avoided at all costs, because it signaled a lack of ability. Angela, in contrast, had what Carol Dweck labels a *growth mindset*: she believed that she was capable of learning virtually anything if she invested enough time and effort to do so. Effort was her secret weapon when she was confronted with learning challenges for which her high school had not prepared her.

Researcher Steven Robbins and his colleagues Jeff Allen, Alex Casillas, Christina Peterson, and Huy Le

have found that this investment of effort adds significantly to the ability to predict students' first-year GPA and persistence to the sophomore year, over and above their academic preparation and demographic characteristics. When students see themselves as hardworking and conscientious, invest time studying, persist at a difficult task until they complete it, and do not give up when they get confused or bored, this level of effort pays off in higher grades and enables them to remain enrolled in college. Psychologists John Lounsbury, Leslee Fisher, Jacob Levy, and Deborah Welsh have confirmed that this persistence is the character strength most predictive of college GPA.

**Self-Regulated Learning.** But academic determination is more than just effort or persistence to complete a task. I noticed that Angela not only had a different view of effort than Carla did, but that she also seemed to have learned how to take control of her own learning. She had learned that different learning strategies worked better for some assignments than for others; she had also learned to ask for help when she wasn't sure what was expected. She had learned strategies for determining for herself whether she had learned the material, as well as strategies for actively constructing meaning out of the material that was assigned. When she studied, she spent much of her time putting the concepts into her own words or teaching them to others in her study group. Carla, in comparison, seemed to view the learning process as something that was mostly beyond her control. If she was confused by a reading assignment, she was more likely to close the book in frustration and go out for ice cream than to go back and try to figure it out or ask another student to explain it to her.

**Environmental Mastery.** This element of control is an important aspect of academic thriving—and the good news is that, as with all the elements of the Thriving Quotient, it is something that can be changed within a student. When students have an internal locus of control, believing that their academic outcomes are up to them, they approach academic tasks with more

Thinking about how the material could be applied to personal relationships or to real-life problems can generate a deeper level of interest and meaningful processing within the student, leading to higher levels of engaged learning.

confidence and are willing to invest more effort. Students who feel that academic outcomes are within their own control begin to see themselves as more competent, as capable of succeeding academically. They also begin to take control not only of their own learning, but also of other demands of college life, such as managing their time effectively. This “environmental mastery,” as Carol Ryff refers to it, contributes to their overall ability to cope with college life and experience success. Angela had been fortunate to have instructors with clear expectations, instructors who also began their courses by emphasizing to students that there were specific strategies they could learn for succeeding in their class—and that it was the instructor’s job to teach students those strategies. Communicating to students very early in their college career that their success is up to them and teaching them strategies for succeeding in specific classes contributes to the development of the academic determination that enables students to thrive academically.

**Goal-Directed Thinking: Academic Hope.** The final aspect of academic determination is goal-directed thinking, or what Rick Snyder labels “hope.” Hope consists of students’ ability to set important goals they are motivated to achieve, then to invest the time and energy to engage in and sustain the behaviors needed to reach those goals—as well as the behaviors needed to overcome obstacles to their goals. *Pathways thinking* enables them to create strategies for reaching their goals and overcoming obstacles; *agency thinking* represents the motivation to use those strategies. Students with high levels of hope tend to approach life with greater zest; they are also more likely to earn better grades and to complete college.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: FOSTERING ACADEMIC DETERMINATION

**B**ECAUSE ACADEMIC DETERMINATION CONTRIBUTES so significantly to students’ academic success, institutions could enable more students to thrive by fostering the development of academic determination through multiple approaches across campus. Individual approaches, such as academic advising, could be used to teach students

the goal-directed thinking inherent in hope. Classroom approaches, such as the first-year experience course, could teach students that there are strategies for succeeding in college, and that effort lies at the heart of most success. Student life programming and support services could communicate to students that help-seeking behaviors are a normal part of the learning process in college. Taken together, these three approaches provide multiple avenues for students to develop academic determination.

**Academic Advising: Building Hope.** The academic advising relationship is the only structured opportunity that all students on every college campus have for an ongoing, one-on-one interaction with a concerned representative of the institution. No new programs or structures need be created; we already have the framework for significantly impacting our students’ thriving on every campus. The primary purpose of academic advising is to help students maximize the educational benefits available to them; thus, using the academic advising relationship as the cornerstone for enhancing student thriving is a potentially effective approach that can fit a wide variety of campuses. The entry into this effective approach is by training advisors to build hope in their students. Psychologist Shane Lopez and his colleagues, Rick Snyder, Jeana Magyar-Moe, Lisa Edwards, Jennifer Teramoto Pedrotti, Kelly Janowski, Jerri Turner, and Cindy Pressgrove, believe that hope building is a skill that can be taught to students that involves (a) clearly conceptualizing important and meaningful goals, (b) developing specific strategies for reaching those goals and breaking those strategies into steps, and (c) reframing obstacles as challenges that can be overcome. As noted in my previous work with Eileen Hulme, Roderick Hetzel, and Shane Lopez, advisors are in an ideal position to build hope in students, as they “form a working alliance with students and assist them in setting realistic goals and brainstorming multiple pathways to reach their goals by capitalizing on their strengths” (p. 571).

**First-Year Experience Courses: Learning How to Learn.** A significant body of research, documented by Lee Upcraft, John Gardner, and Betsy Barefoot, has demonstrated the potential for the first-

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# The more messages students hear from a wide variety of sources, the more likely those messages are to make an impact on students' academic thriving.

year experience to positively impact students and set them on a trajectory for success. The first-year seminar is also the ideal place for students to not only experience engaging pedagogy, but also to learn the psychological processes that are under their control and can affect their academic success. As Marcia Heiman notes, "Learning to Learn" is an example of this approach; it is a three-unit course designed at Boston College based on a system of research-based learning strategies that encourage students to move away from rote memory toward inquiry-based learning. It teaches students how to ask good questions, how to seek and benefit from feedback, how to break down complex ideas into their components, and how to create self-directed learning goals. Marcia Heiman notes that their track record is impressive: significantly higher grades, retention rates, and course completion rates. When the first-year course is combined with two other effective strategies—the instructor as the students' advisor for the first year, with the course linked thematically in a learning community to one or two other courses students are taking—the potential for positively influencing students' academic thriving rises exponentially.

**Student Life Programming: Normalizing the Help-Seeking Process.** The final implication for practice is that creating a campus environment where effort and help seeking are viewed as normative aspects of the college experience will increase the likelihood that more students are able to thrive. Too often, effort is viewed as needed only by those of low ability, and help seeking is perceived as a sign of weakness. Student affairs educators are in a position to change the campus norms, as they communicate to new students during orientation and interact with students in academic support services, the career center, the counseling center, and student leadership development programs. Conveying that effort is a necessary ingredient in success can be accomplished by bringing highly successful alumni to campus to share their stories of what they invested in order to be so successful. Using upper-class peer leaders to share their journeys and success tips with first-year students can also convey an important message about the help that is readily available on campus and how a student might access it. The more mes-

sages students hear from a wide variety of sources, the more likely those messages are to make an impact on students' academic thriving.

## CONCLUSION

**ALTHOUGH BOTH ANGELA AND CARLA** were successful students, in that they had graduated from college despite entering at risk, Angela had thrived academically, while Carla had basically survived. Angela was engaged in the learning process; she had learned to ask good questions, to apply course material to important aspects of her life, to see multiple perspectives as she was mindfully attending to her learning, and to explore beyond what was required for a class. She had also learned to take control of her own learning, to manage her time effectively to meet the varying demands of different courses and assignments, to go back and try again when she was confused or lost, and to invest effort and try different strategies for meeting the academic goals that were important to her. Despite entering college from a disadvantaged educational background, she had been fortunate to be part of a first-year course that taught her these learning strategies. From the beginning of her college experience, she had received messages about the role of effort in success, how to be mindfully engaged in deep learning, and that getting help was expected of every student. Her advisor had worked with her to clearly conceptualize her academic goals and design strategies for meeting those goals, and instructors in virtually every one of her classes had been part of a faculty development program designed to equip them with engaging pedagogical skills.

Carla had started out as the same at-risk student that Angela was, unsure of her ability to succeed in college yet with a deep desire to make a difference in the world. Through the typical "roulette" of higher education, she had not had the same quality of instructors throughout her college experience. Her advisor had focused entirely on course registration and had missed the opportunity to discuss life goals with her. Her peer leader was more interested in socializing than in impacting students' learning. And the culture on her residence floor was that only the losers sought help. As a result, her academic experience was



entirely different than Angela's: she learned what to do to get the grade, focused on others' expectations of her, and took the classes that represented the path of least resistance toward a bachelor's degree. In short, she survived. But how different her life might be after college if she had learned to thrive!

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