

High Hopes: Fostering a Culture of Hope at a Community College

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A recent report from the American Association of Community Colleges indicates that about half of first-year students do not return for a second year, and 35% of students withdraw despite having an A or B average. These students may have particularly challenging circumstances, such as juggling family and work obligations along with school. The authors suggest that students' sense of "hopefulness" forecasts their academic success and persistence, and offer an account of their ongoing campus-wide efforts to create more hopeful classrooms and experiences for their students.

We all know bright, talented college students who do not succeed in the academic world—they fail or they drop-out. As educators and researchers, we understand that intelligence and academic preparedness are not the only factors that predict success among our students. A report by the American Association of Community Colleges (2012) indicates that at community colleges, approximately half of first-year students do not return for their second year and nearly 35% of college students who withdraw have an A or B average at the time they stop attending classes (Zhai & Monzon, 2001). A complex mix of internal and external factors, such as motivation, family and work obligations, and financial stressors are related to student success and degree completion (Johnson, Rochkind, Ott, & Dupont, 2012). Additionally, there is a growing body of research that indicates that our students' sense of "hopefulness" forecasts their academic success. In other words, the more hopeful students are, the more likely they are to persist despite factors working against them (e.g. Snyder, et al., 2002).

In the fall of 2012, the Director for the Center for Teaching and Learning at Sinclair Community College in Dayton, Ohio, initiated a series of discussions with a cross-disciplinary team of faculty about the concept of "hope," based on an article that appeared in *Inside Higher Education* (Grasgreen, 2012). After eighteen months of sometimes spirited conversations, literature reviews, research planning, workshop development meetings, and presentations, members of our team have become vocal advocates for the importance of fostering hope among students on our campus. In what follows, we offer a brief overview of relevant hope studies literature and an explanation of how we have developed research on the subject and applied the research on hope to our campus.

Hope Research

Scholars have discovered that levels of hopefulness felt by students are strong predictors of future academic success. Snyder and his colleagues (2002) conducted a six-year study of the connections between hope and academic success. Students at a Midwestern state university were

tracked from their first semester through graduation. The students first took the Hope Scale (Snyder, et al., 1991) inventory to determine their relative levels of hope prior to finishing their first semester. The researchers discovered a 16% discrepancy between the academic success rates of low-hope vs. high-hope students. The study (Snyder et al., 2002) concluded that the “low-hope relative to the high-hope students immediately do more poorly and are far less likely to graduate” (p. 824). Other researchers (Day, Hanson, Maltby, Proctor, & Wood, 2010) assert that when students feel as if they are in control and making progress toward their goals, their feelings of hope and academic performance rise accordingly. Liz Day and her colleagues (2010) demonstrated that the trait of hope uniquely predicted academic performance among a sample of college students, even when controlling for levels of intelligence and previous levels of academic success.

“Hope,” as defined by academic researchers and theorists, differs from the common usage of hope, which refers to limitless expectations or standards (Weingarten, 2010). It is often confused with the idea of optimism, or the expectation that one should find a way to consistently look at everything in a positive light. The common usage of hope may set individuals up for failure, as it does not necessarily account for the messiness of reality, nor does it allow for normal feelings of doubt or despair. Therefore, individuals who are unable to view the world through rose-colored glasses *all the time* feel as though they cannot describe themselves as “hopeful” (Weingarten, 2010).

But rose-colored glasses are not a requirement for sustaining hope, especially the type of academic hope we suggest college teachers and staff foster in students. The concept of hope, and the subcategory of academic hope, is comprised of goals, pathways, and agency (Snyder, 1995; Snyder et al., 2002). Goals are the accomplishments students seek to achieve. Therefore, academic goals should be realistic and attainable (Weingarten, 2010). The idea that something is within grasp staves off feelings of hopelessness (Weingarten, 2010). Students may require some assistance to identify appropriate outcomes, as reasonable goals should trump idealistic expectations. Students may also need help in clarifying realistic timeframes in which to meet their goals.

Pathways are the plans, strategies, or routes one identifies as being available to achieve these goals. Carving out pathways can be a complex process that involves trial and error, but emphasis should be placed “on the journey, rather than the arrival” (Weingarten, 2010, p. 8). A student’s plans or strategies to achieve their goals should also be modified as needed, which requires flexibility, critical thinking, problem-solving, and even a little creativity to assure that potential barriers are not seen as absolute roadblocks (Weingarten, 2010). Faculty, staff, family, friends, and classmates can all be enlisted to participate in creating pathways that foster hope.

Agency is the drive or motivation that keeps the individual moving toward goals. The opportunity to influence the future can be very motivating and can encourage students to continue on their educational journey. When the future seems predetermined, however, such as when students test into developmental education classes, a student’s desire to act decreases; attempting to change seems futile (Weingarten, 2010).

Hope at a Community College

For today's college students, remaining hopeful can be a challenge. Indeed, some (Day et al., 2010) have argued that "hope" is an endangered concept in the evolving notion of the "American dream," as levels of hope have plummeted along with the decline in the economic environment. And while the economy shows signs of improvement, many young people continue to struggle. Nearly half of unemployed Americans are under the age of 34 (Ruetschin & Draut, 2013). Many students no longer have the conviction that they will attain jobs that will provide for their future families, but the possibility of such attainment keeps them enrolled in school. A college degree may not be a guarantee of employment, but the prospects for those without a degree are significantly bleaker (Ruetschin & Draut, 2013). Our students may bring this sense of hopelessness with them into our classrooms and institutions, but we believe, and a growing body of research indicates, that remaining hopeful may be the very key to their academic success (e.g., Synder et al., 2002).

What can we do as educators and researchers? How can we help our students combat hopelessness? How can we create more hopeful classrooms and experiences for our students across our campuses? Can we design and conduct research that will contribute to the understanding and the application of the concept of hope to promote the success of our students? These were some of the questions we struggled with at Sinclair Community College.

Our institution encourages a culture of innovation among our faculty, and the Director of the Center for Teaching and Learning organized the Hope Team to discuss this promising area of research and how we could best apply the findings to our students and faculty. The meetings of our team began in September 2012 and led to the development of workshops on "Fostering Hope and Academic Success," which have been attended by approximately 250 staff and faculty at Sinclair and presented to participants at the Lilly Conference on college teaching and the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) conference on academic advising. During these workshops participants learn about the concept of hope and its relationship to academic success.

Hopeful activities and assignments. As one focus, workshop participants are offered strategies for fostering a hopeful classroom. Research encourages faculty to engage in classroom activities that have meaningful "ends-in-view" (Nolan & Stitzlein, 2011) as opposed to more theoretical and abstract activities that may not provide immediate feedback. When the goal of the activity is achieved, then, students and faculty both have a sense of accomplishment and progress in the course. For example, one English professor at Sinclair resists assigning a single, traditional, lengthy essay in favor of scaffolded classroom writing activities and immediate feedback. The course outcomes are met through the longer essay that results from these scaffolded activities, but the students do not feel overwhelmed by a one-shot high stakes essay. If a student veers off target during one of the shorter writing activities, it is easier to catch, and the professor can then encourage that student to make a plan for completing the final paper.

Offering frequent progress reports and low-stakes assignments are more likely to foster hope than building a syllabus around one or two high-stakes exams or assignments. When students

believe their grade is redeemable or they can envision opportunities for raising their grade in the future, then they are more likely to persist. In short, they have hope.

Hopeful language. Using hopeful language—language that presumes students will complete the course—is another strategy for building a hopeful classroom, syllabus, and teaching philosophy. When speaking to students, we encourage teachers to overtly *expect* students to finish an assignment or *expect* students to finish the class. No question should exist as to whether a student will succeed in a class. The only questions revolve around the pathways a student will use to make that success a reality. In constructing a syllabus and writing course and classroom policies, we encourage faculty to avoid harsh and inflexible language, such as the examples here from actual faculty syllabi: “Late papers are not accepted under any circumstance” or “If you are more than ten minutes late, don’t bother coming to class.” The hopeful syllabus will reflect a faculty member’s commitment to working with students and underscore that the faculty member’s policies are not rigid; therefore, students feel they have a path to completing the class should they temporarily get off course.

Our team has become convinced that to promote academic success we need to understand our students in a more holistic way and to intervene on multiple levels. Educational research and faculty development have often focused on curriculum and pedagogical issues as avenues for improving student success, but we have come to realize that there may be more “affective” ways of increasing student learning and success. We have learned that hope theory can be directly applied in the classroom and can be implemented in multiple ways by instructors across disciplines, but the theory also offers a wonderful framework for academic, career, or financial aid advisors, as well as other student services staff, to consider as they work with students. At Sinclair, our Hope Team has now expanded beyond faculty to include representatives from academic advising and career services and we hope to continue to grow the team to include other important student services areas on campus. We are beginning to formalize plans to research the effectiveness of our “hopeful” classroom strategies and investigate the relationships between student and faculty (adjunct and full-time) levels of hopefulness and academic success. Anecdotally, we have a number of examples of faculty who have changed their syllabi and activities to make them more “hopeful,” and we often hear from faculty completing our workshop that they plan to implement some of the strategies we offered.

While it may sound a little cliché, our team has a new “hope” for our campus. We have set realistic goals for ourselves and we can see pathways to achieve those goals. If we encounter obstacles, we will make modifications and learn from our experiences. And we are committed to work together and grow as a community, empowered by our mission to help our students.

We challenge you to consider ways to promote “hopefulness” on your campus. What can you do to foster hope and success among your students and to contribute to this promising area of research?

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