

Developing Students to Be Their Best

By Larry Braskamp, coauthor of *Putting Students First: How Colleges Develop Students Purposefully*

It takes a whole campus of “whole persons to develop whole students” is a phrase we often use to describe how we in higher education can best assist students to invest the talent, time, and treasure that bring them meaning and fulfillment. Who students are is important — their sense of self, their talents, strengths, and purpose in life. Higher education leaders thus like to focus on such questions as: “Who am I?” and “How do I best contribute to make this a better world?”

In asking these questions we want to focus on getting students to think and reflect on their talents and strengths as central to their own self development and growth. Similarly, we want the faculty to create a community (similar to the workplace in the world of business) that will focus on helping students develop to the fullest extent. We think students thrive best in an environment that focuses on helping them discover their strengths. We do that by listening to who they really are, what they want to be and do, their aims in life, their deepest values, and their purpose in life, and by encouraging them to gain in their self knowledge and take action, i.e., becoming engaged in college by practicing and developing their talents and strengths. In short, college is the place where students are to discover, develop, and apply their strengths to become the whole persons they are meant to be.

In our study of 10 private, church-related colleges, we used a framework of four Cs — culture, curriculum, co-curriculum, and community — to better understand how the whole campus influences student development. What and how do faculty and professionals in student affairs and ministry purposefully interact and influence students as they progress through colleges? How do they assist students in becoming more aware of their strengths and purpose in life, and grow and develop holistically?

In *Putting Students First*, we provide many examples of programs and strategies for each of the four Cs, and conclude that campuses that develop students purposefully have three major characteristics: mission is reality not rhetoric, student learning and development are integrated, and a community of support and challenge exists for students, faculty, and staff. In summary, we recommend that college leaders begin by better understanding who their students are and then become a fellow traveler with them in their journey to become the person they truly want to be and become contributors to the world in which they live and will lead in the future.

We also desire to help leaders in colleges to be effective leaders. We assume that they, like students, find meaning and purpose in life when they know who they are and become engaged in this world by using their talents and strengths to make the world a better place to live. To do so then, leaders also need to become self aware of their strengths and opportunities to contribute, better manage themselves, and assist others by leading them to know and use strengths — investing their time, talents, and treasures in meaningful ways. In short, leaders create an environment that fosters their colleagues and students to also effectively discover, develop, and apply their strengths.

Larry Braskamp is a professor emeritus of education at Loyola University in Chicago, where he served as senior vice president for academic affairs. Braskamp also joined Gallup as a Senior Scientist and serves as a consultant for Gallup’s higher education division. He works with campus leaders in establishing and evaluating a StrengthsQuest program on their campuses.

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