

Fulfilling the Promise:

Strengths at Community and Technical Colleges

By Rick Hogrefe

- A 24-year-old first generation Latino student
- A middle-aged, single mother of two, divorced from an abusive husband
- A 63-year-old immigrant from Vietnam learning the English language
- A 38-year-old man pursuing a second career after having been laid off
- A recent high school graduate who was valedictorian of her class

These are the some of the many faces of our nation's two-year colleges. For many Americans, including some employed in higher education, the word "college" conjures up images of young adults living in residence halls and attending class in ivy-covered buildings. Interestingly, this is the experience for only about half of today's undergraduates in the United States. The other 46% of undergraduates, coupled with another 5.6 million Americans enrolled in noncredit courses are students at one of the nation's 1,200 two-year colleges.

Attendees at the recent "Building a Strengths-Based Campus" conference sponsored by Gallup were challenged in the opening session to bring strengths to our nation's 17 million college students. To do so requires that we become more keenly aware of two-year colleges — their missions, their students, and the challenges they face. Arguably, it is at our nation's community, technical, and junior colleges where strengths-based education holds its greatest potential, a potential already being realized in premier programs at several two-year colleges throughout the country.

According to the American Association of Community Colleges (AACC), as of 2006, there were 11.5 million Americans enrolled in two-year colleges. Community college enrollment has risen significantly over the past 25 years and at a greater rate than four-year colleges. This enrollment is

expected to continue to grow. In addition to sheer numbers, the population of students attending two-year colleges is incredibly diverse. To many, the statistics are surprising. The average age of community college students in the United States is 29. Community and technical colleges are often the preferred choice of adult learners attending college for the first time, returning for retraining or to complete a degree, or taking non-credit coursework.

Two-year college students are ethnically diverse as well. Minority students represent between 6% and 8% of all students enrolled in institutions of higher learning, yet they constitute 34% of the current community college enrollment nationwide. Specifically, two-year colleges serve well over half of the Hispanic and Native American students in higher education and 47% of African American and Asian students. Thirty-nine percent are first-generation college students.

As diverse as the population of two-year colleges is, so too are their missions. All two-year colleges share the goal of serving their local community. Most are public institutions that, because of their low tuition and open enrollment policies, attract students with a variety of educational goals. Many students attend community colleges in preparation for transfer to a four-year institution. Attending a community college for the first two years can save a student, in some cases, tens of thousands of dollars. Community and technical colleges are also the predominant source for vocational and career education in our country. According to statistics from the AACC Web site, more than half of nurses and allied health professionals and more than 80% of firefighters, law enforcement officials, and emergency medical professionals are trained at two-year colleges. Community colleges attract students interested in taking coursework for personal enrichment as well as those requiring job training

and re-training. Moreover, two-year colleges are centers for workforce development as well as adult education, including English as a second language instruction.

The diverse, sometimes conflicting missions of two-year colleges are just a few of the factors that present challenges to community and technical college faculty, staff, and administrators. Because most two-year colleges are open access institutions, many students are underprepared for college level work. In California's community colleges, for example, the only admissions requirements are that students be 18 years of age and be able to benefit from instruction. Statistics vary; however, conservative estimates are that more than half of students entering California's community college system require basic skills coursework in math and/or English. These statistics are representative of the entire country, where it is estimated that 40% of students take at least one remedial course. Community and technical colleges also attract students with disabilities at a greater rate than four-year institutions. Furthermore, many two-year college students have inadequate support systems in place to assist them in attaining their educational goals. For example, 17% of community college students nationwide are single parents.

These students, and their educators who work with them, face unique challenges that many other students do not.

As is likely evident, whether it's their minority or first-generation college student status, life circumstances that have demanded they return to school, or underpreparedness for college level work, students in America's two-year colleges face many potential obstacles to their success. That is why the promise of strengths-based education is so valuable to these institutions and the students they serve. Strengths provide a tool by which community college educators can reframe the concept of student success. For the student who has been forced to return to school because of an unexpected layoff, strengths help them identify and refine the talents they will contribute to a new employer. Strengths allow the basic skills student to be reminded of

what they can do rather than a constant reminder of what they can't. Strengths provide greater direction to the student planning to transfer to a prestigious four-year institution. The examples are endless.

Many community and technical colleges have already realized the power of strengths and have worked to incorporate them into their educational programs. Best practices are being developed in outstanding programs at two-year colleges throughout the country. Here is a look at five of them.

TEXAS STATE TECHNICAL COLLEGE–WACO, Waco, Texas

Texas State Technical College–Waco has incorporated the strengths philosophy into a program that serves probationary students. The program, called Another Chance to Succeed or ACTS, is a six-week course that allows students at risk of being dismissed from the college to identify their talents and apply those talents to achieve greater success in the classroom. As a result of this strengths intervention, 62% of students in the ACTS program improved their GPA the next semester, as compared to 26% of probationary students who did not participate in the program.

Larry Davis, coordinator of Retention Services at Texas State Technical College–Waco, has even authored a text that is used as a part of the ACTS program, entitled *Getting Your "ACT" Together: A True Parable About College Success*. It is available for purchase on barnesandnoble.com.



SOUTHEAST COMMUNITY COLLEGE, Lincoln, Nebraska

The Entrepreneurship Center at Southeast Community College in Lincoln, Nebraska, is a model for the integration of strengths into an academic program. Students enrolled in this program take a series of six courses toward the goal of earning a certificate or associate degree in business administration with an emphasis in entrepreneurship. A discussion of talent and its application to entrepreneurial enterprise is woven throughout the curriculum. At the end of the capstone course, students are prepared to start their business, having developed a business plan as well as personal philosophy of business and strengths assessment. The center provides support to entrepreneurs even after graduation, including an incubation lab and access to community resources.

CHATTANOOGA STATE TECHNICAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE, Chattanooga, Tennessee

Chattanooga State Technical Community College was one of the first community colleges in the country to adopt the StrengthsQuest program. Since 2002, strengths has been a part of the first-year experience course, part of the college's Renaissance Institute. In the course, students learn the strategies of successful college students, which when coupled with their themes of talent will help them achieve success in their college life and beyond. The use of strengths in first-year experience programs like Chattanooga State's has been demonstrated to increase retention, persistence, and success.

TOMPKINS CORTLANDS COMMUNITY COLLEGE, Dryden, New York

On its Web site, Tompkins Cortland Community College in upstate New York describes itself as a "learning-centered college that helps our students build on their strengths." In addition to its use with students, TC3 has had tremendous

success in building a professional development program around strengths. More than half of the college's faculty and staff have taken the Clifton StrengthsFinder and participated in an introductory workshop. Staff report enhanced self-understanding and increased team building and conflict resolution skills, all toward the college's vision "to see strengths and unique potential in every person."

IVY TECH COMMUNITY COLLEGE, South Bend, Indiana

With sites throughout Northern Indiana, Ivy Tech Community College North Central has the goal of becoming a strengths-based campus. With that hope in mind, the college has instituted the Strengths Initiative Steering Committee, a group whose mission it is to bring strengths to the college's more than 5,000 students as well as faculty, staff, and administrators. The initiative, led by Jerry Madsen, is focused on integrating strengths into professional development, academic affairs, and student life. Successes so far include a robust schedule of Intro to Strengths training sessions and successful use of StrengthsQuest in IVY 070 and 071 college success courses. To learn more about Ivy Tech's initiative and read some fun things about strengths, check out their Strengths blog at <http://ivytech.typepad.com/strengths>.