

**EFFECTS OF A STRENGTHS-BASED FIRST-YEAR SEMINAR ON STUDENT  
THRIVING**

A Dissertation

by

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Submitted to the Office of Graduate and Professional Studies of  
Texas A&M University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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December 2016

Major Subject: Educational Administration

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## ABSTRACT

Colleges and universities commonly implement first-year seminars to support new students during the challenging and formative first semester. These programs are widely regarded as highly effective in promoting student persistence through the first year and beyond. However, attention on the indirect outcome of persistence as the primary measure of effectiveness has resulted in limited exploration of more holistic impacts of first-year seminars during students' first semester. This study utilized a conceptualization of student success called *thriving* to examine the effects of a first-year seminar on student well-being. The curriculum for the seminar focused on strengths awareness and development grounded in the StrengthsFinder® classification of human talents, as strengths-based practices have been shown to contribute to various measures of individual well-being. A quasi-experimental design was used with student participants enrolled in either a treatment section ( $n=87$ ) that followed the strengths-based curriculum or a control section ( $n=45$ ) that followed the seminar's traditional curriculum.

Dependent variables were scales measured by the Thriving Quotient™ and included Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, Diverse Citizenship, and Psychological Sense of Community. Participants in both treatment conditions were enrolled in sections of a non-credit bearing first-year seminar at a large, selective private institution in the southwestern United States. The seminar had six meetings approximately biweekly through the first

ten weeks of the fall 2014 semester. Participants completed The Thriving Quotient™ pretest survey on the first class meeting and the posttest instrument on the seminar's final day. Paired-samples *t* tests revealed that neither the treatment nor the control group demonstrated a statistically significant change in overall thriving scores from the time of the pretest to the posttest. A one-way MANCOVA was conducted to determine whether significant differences existed between treatment and control groups in posttest scores, after controlling for participants' scores on the pretest. Results of the analysis showed that such a difference did not exist between the two groups. Further examination of the effects on specific scales of the thriving construct was therefore not conducted.

## DEDICATION

To my wife. Avery, you have loved me so fully and unconditionally on this journey. You have been my rock and have carried us all in ways I can never fully understand. You have given me belief that I *could* finish this race, hope that I *would* indeed finish, and—most gratefully—grace for the winding path. Thank you for your love, for knowing me and choosing me each and every day. There are no words or actions that can match the depth of my gratitude for all that you are. I don't have much, but this finished race is for you. We did it! With all my love, for the rest of my life...

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This work could not have been without the faithful presence of so many people. First, my families have offered the incredible gift of understanding, along with encouragement and even pride in this endeavor. Thank you for the untold blessing of your support.

I have been surrounded each day by colleagues who have celebrated victories along the way and have been steadfast in extending grace for the many times I have not been fully present. You will never know what your friendship has meant to me.

A number of individuals—including Drs. Todd Ferguson, Tiffani Riggers-Piehl, Rishi Sriram, and Eric McIntosh—have lent expertise and sage advice throughout this process. You have each been an invaluable resource and guide, and I am so appreciative of the time and knowledge you have freely shared. Dr. Laurie Schreiner has gone above and beyond to offer ideas and feedback. I cannot thank you enough for your enthusiasm and support of this study.

The members of my committee have each played a significant role in my journey. Dr. Ben Welch, your kindness, care, and warm laugh have been a source of great comfort. Thank you for helping to keep me centered in this pursuit. Dr. Vince Lechuga, each of your classes has been rich, challenging, and immensely engaging. I have relished the opportunity to learn from you. Thank you for your guidance and perspective. Dr. Kelli Peck Parrott, you exude joy and passion for your work, and your heart for students is contagious. Thank you for pushing me to be my best, and for your

constant support and encouragement. Dr. Glenda Musoba, you have ridden through the mud with me and for that I am ever grateful! You have been a continual source of hope and have never wavered in your confidence that I would reach the end. Thank you for your faith in me and for the wisdom and direction you have so often provided.

Lastly, my beautiful boys have given purpose and inspiration in this undertaking. This journey has profoundly affected me in many ways, and foremost is my perspective on struggle and effort. Carol Dweck's concepts of fixed and growth mindsets have been animated in the challenge of completing this dissertation. Learning to press on in the face of uncertainty has been both the unrelenting tutor and the enduring wisdom I could not have gained any other way. Logan and Ethan, my greatest hope from this journey is that the lessons I am continually learning will empower me to be more of the father you need and deserve. I pray that you grow to be men of courage, of curiosity, of creativity, and of compassion. You are the richest of gifts in my life. You are enough. You are loved. And you can do hard things.

## **CONTRIBUTORS AND FUNDING SOURCES**

### **Contributors**

This work was supported by a dissertation committee consisting of Associate Professor Glenda Musoba [advisor] and Associate Professor Vicente Lechuga of the Department of Educational Administration & Human Resource Development, Assistant Dean for Executive Education and Clinical Professor Ben Welch of the Department of Management, and Clinical Professor Kelli Peck Parrott of the Department of Higher Education Administration at the University of Florida.

All work for the dissertation was completed independently by the student.

### **Funding Sources**

There are no outside funding contributions to acknowledge related to the research and compilation of this document.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

### **The Importance of Student Success**

Conversations about student success are critical, for the enterprise of higher education as a whole, for individual institutions, and for students themselves. Though the goals and activities of the modern university or “multiversity” (Kerr, 1963) are broad-reaching, an imperative of student learning and development remains central to the core mission of every college and university. Yet despite the centrality of the student experience to the life and purpose of any institution, there exists a peculiar ambiguity about what actually constitutes a successful college experience.

In his classic text *How Colleges Work: The Cybernetics of Academic Organization and Leadership*, Robert Birnbaum (1988) discusses the lack of a single, clear and quantifiable metric for higher education. Where many organizations can ultimately point to profits as a reflection of effectiveness or success, the outcome or product for colleges and universities is far less straightforward. This daunting imprecision notwithstanding, institutions must identify and articulate a grounding vision of student success that provides purpose, direction, and a barometer of effectiveness. Such a vision matters a great deal for the trajectory of a campus and for the particular structures, policies, practices, and strategies that give shape to that vision. As Birnbaum points out, “The beliefs held by administrators and others who influence institutional life

affect how they behave, how they interpret their experiences, and even what they ‘see’” (p. xiv, 1988). Ultimately, these guiding beliefs do actually shape the experiences of the students themselves (Berger, 2000; Berger & Braxton, 1998).

### **Predominant Approaches to Student Success**

Traditional notions of college student success view attainment of an undergraduate degree as a necessary ingredient, and the culmination, of a truly successful collegiate experience (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges, Hayek, 2007). Colleges and universities have therefore embraced the use of degree completion—through various measures of graduation rates—as a critical metric for determining both student success and their own institutional effectiveness (Braxton, 2003). Unfortunately, approximately half of the students who begin a degree do not matriculate to completion, a percentage that has remained steady for decades (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). The stark reality of the prevalence of student departure has vaulted retention to the forefront of conversations about and research on student success.

The seminal work of Vincent Tinto (1975), which explored the primary sociological reasons that students depart from institutions, has been particularly influential in shaping collective understanding of the causes of student attrition. Tinto’s framework identified social and academic integration as twin pillars of students’ successful acclimation into their new university communities, emphasizing the importance of degree of fit between an individual student and the institution. Each student is understood to bring with him or her a unique set of characteristics or inputs that interact with the college’s culture and environment. Students’ perceptions of their

alignment with the norms of the social and academic communities of the institution influence their continued decisions about persisting to degree completion. A stronger sense of fit increases the likelihood that a student will remain at the institution.

Tinto's original framework—along with later revisions (1987, 1993)—has been widely adopted, to the point of being considered “the most commonly used theory in higher education” (Melguizo, 2011, p. 396). His theory has become so embedded in the fabric of higher education that student success and retention are now inextricably linked. Though degree completion is undoubtedly a desirable outcome, this single measure has become essentially a proxy that treats the growth and healthy functioning of a person as one and the same with matriculation through the requirements for obtaining a college degree. The obvious hope is that the potential benefits of a college experience (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005) are indeed being reaped by each and every student who persists through graduation. These benefits, however, are complex, far-reaching, and include more than simply the status or opportunities afforded by a college diploma. There are therefore a number of concerns with an approach that views student success as equivalent to degree attainment.

One such concern with equating persistence to degree and student success is that this perspective is overly simplistic and reductive. On its own, attention to student persistence is not inherently problematic. Helping students remain in and graduate from college are indeed positive institutional desires and outcomes. However, in practice, focusing on student retention can be a slippery slope. All too often, colleges place the proverbial cart before the horse by fixating on persistence rates above students' actual

experiences. The danger, then, is that retention itself becomes the institution's goal, rather than merely one marker of a much larger and more holistic picture. Student persistence should more properly be understood as a byproduct of an enriching, illuminating experience (Noel, 1985). Kenzie (2012) contends that the dominant view that equates student success with degree attainment is "limited, offering little insight into the complexities of success" (p. xviii). Far too often, such an approach becomes one of institutional convenience rather than of substance.

An additional concern is that the paradigm of student success as persistence is primarily oriented around the prevention of a possible negative outcome—student departure. One of the earliest theories of student departure was formulated by Spady (1970), based heavily on work by Durkheim (1953) that examined factors that contribute to suicide. Spady viewed a student's decision to remove himself from a college setting as akin to removing oneself from society. As Durkheim found with instances of suicide, Spady suggested that lack of integration into one's social community was a major contributor in voluntary student departure from a college or university. Tinto's (1975) pivotal framework of student attrition was largely an extension of Spady's work. In a revision of his model, Tinto (1987) incorporated ideas from Van Gennep (1960) in articulating the importance of successfully navigating various stages of transition as students integrate into the college environment. Still, the undergirding concepts were formed around identifying and potentially mitigating causes of undesirable outcomes. "Using this approach, students leave college because they fail to separate from a previous socializing agent, fail to negotiate a transitional period, and fail to incorporate

new values into their lives at school” (Bean & Eaton, 2001, p. 74). The predominance of Tinto’s framework has resulted in a systemic approach to student success that is built on a foundation of failure prevention.

A third limitation of the dominant student success view is that it minimizes overall health and well-being, including psychological functioning. Bean and Eaton (2000) levied this criticism of existing student departure frameworks at the time they offered their own retention model. Student departure, they contended, is a behavior that cannot be properly understood apart from the psychological motivations that drive such action. Consequently, their model examined the “psychological processes that lead to academic and social integration” (Bean & Eaton, 2001, p. 74); like Tinto, they supported the view that departure results from a lack of social integration, academic integration, or both. Their framework has contributed significantly to collective understanding of the complexities and the highly individualized nature of student departure. And yet, even their work does not go far enough in providing an alternative to the view that success can be sufficiently represented by graduation. Ultimately, their model seeks greater understanding of the nature of student departure, which is a worthy endeavor indeed. However, it cannot be said that a student’s choice to remain in college—or perhaps more crudely *not* making a choice to leave—can meaningfully equate to a successful experience. Unfortunately, this is essentially what the academy has done in settling for positions and approaches that treat student persistence as the goal.

Additionally, research (Adelman, 1999, 2006) suggests that students with certain inputs—such as high entrance test scores, strong high school academic records, and

higher socioeconomic status—may be more likely to persist to completion of a college degree. A predilection toward preventing departure over promoting success might encourage institutions to exclusively admit students with these more promising characteristics. Kuh et al. (2005) assert that such an approach of “admitting only the most talented and well-prepared students is neither a solution nor an option” (p. 8), citing considerations such as growing diversity of students entering higher colleges and universities and the increasing need for a workforce and citizenry with at least some level of postsecondary education. Furthermore, Tinto’s perspective focuses heavily on students’ input characteristics, over which institutions have little to no direct influence. This leads to the rather pessimistic view that colleges and universities have scant effect on student persistence, and subsequently on student success (Melguizo, 2011).

The shortcomings of this default view of student success are numerous and critical. Although retention offers a seemingly straightforward measure, the reality of the “ill-structured problem” (Braxton & Mundy, 2001, p. 91) of student success defies easy answers. Kinzie (2012) summarizes the inadequacies of the dominant student success paradigm in this way:

The laser focus on completion may also overshadow other important college processes and outcomes, including the quality of students’ experiences in undergraduate education, student behaviors and level of engagement in educationally purposeful activities, learning outcome attainment, preparation for the world of work and lifelong learning, personal growth and development, and many other desirable outcomes of college. The singular concentration on

graduation rates also provides limited insight into the full scope of what may be contributing to lagging completion rates and, more importantly, what action should be taken to improve student success. Finally, the emphasis on simple survival to degree can eclipse important quality educational experiences that engage students at high levels and help them make the most of their college experience. (p. xix)

As Kenzie suggests, a guiding concept of success in college should speak to the substance and impact of the experience itself. Institutions must concurrently grapple with challenges of helping all students persist in college, while also articulating a rich understanding of success that offers a direction worth pursuing rather than simply an undesirable outcome to avoid.

### **From Prevention to Promotion**

Much like higher education, the field of psychology has largely operated with an approach to success that has been oriented toward prevention. Through the latter part of the twentieth century in particular, psychologists embraced a medical model of professional practice that emphasized diagnosis and treatment of illness or disorder (Seligman, 2003). In 1998, Martin Seligman—then-president of the American Psychological Association—argued that the field had been overly focused on repairing damage at the expense of fostering wholeness (Seligman, 1998). Since that charge, research and interest in topics such as well-being, vitality, and strength have blossomed, leading to the emergence of a subfield known as positive psychology. Positive psychology has brought fervent attention to the substance and indicators of healthy

human living. This pursuit is grounded in the belief that the absence of something negative is not the same as the presence of something positive (Keyes & Haidt, 2003). To that end, the movement has sparked considerable research into aspects of healthy functioning that should be actively promoted and pursued, rather than an exclusive focus on harmful aspects that should be avoided or overcome.

Keyes (2003) and Keyes and Haidt (2003) have used the term *flourishing* to denote optimal psychological and social functioning. Individuals who are flourishing are marked by engagement, purpose, and a sense of meaning in life (Seligman, 2011). As the subfield of positive psychology has evolved, flourishing has taken root as a central concept. Seligman (2011) himself has expressed “that the topic of positive psychology is well-being, that the gold standard for measuring well-being is flourishing, and that the goal of positive psychology is to increase flourishing” (p. 13). Thus, flourishing provides a widely accepted, measurable conceptualization of well-being that informs and shapes the work of practitioners and scholars alike.

### **Thriving: A Well-Being Approach to Student Success**

The principles and concepts of positive psychology have promising implications for and the potential for rich contributions to higher education. A team of researchers directed by Laurie Schreiner has led the way in adapting positive psychology’s orientation to the promotion of well-being for the college student population. Their work represents the intersection of literature on student success and positive psychology, seeking to offer a concept of success that brings together the relevant strengths of these fields. They have proposed a construct called *thriving* (Schreiner, McIntosh, Nelson, &

Pothoven, 2009) that incorporates the social and psychological dimensions of flourishing and adds an academic component that is unique to the college setting. These three themes collectively supply a robust yet concise framework that can guide students and institutions in the pursuit of an enriching college experience. According to Louis and Schreiner (2012), “Rather than defining success solely in terms of academic performance and persistence to graduation, a focus on thriving encourages a more holistic view of student development that includes establishing healthy relationships, making a contribution, and proactively coping with life’s challenges” (p. 21).

The thriving construct addresses well-being across multiple aspects of students’ lives by encompassing five factors grouped within the three broader themes of academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal thriving. 1) Engaged Learning and 2) Academic Determination contribute to the theme of academic thriving. Intrapersonal thriving represents the primary psychological component and consists of 3) Positive Perspective, a way of viewing the world called *optimistic explanatory style*. The final theme of interpersonal thriving is made up of 4) Social Connectedness and 5) Diverse Citizenship (Schreiner, 2010a). The notion of thriving synthesizes existing literature from multiple fields to explore both behavioral and psychological elements of student well-being (Schreiner, 2010b). Students who are thriving are:

fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally. Thriving college students not only are academically successful, they also experience a sense of community and a level of psychological well-being that contributes to their persistence to

graduation and allows them to gain maximum benefit from being in college.

(Schreiner, 2010a, p. 4)

Researchers have designed a valid and reliable 25-item instrument called The Thriving Quotient to measure the five factors, along with additional items for scales that have been shown to be correlated with thriving (Schreiner, 2012). Thriving offers an enriched understanding of student success that provides highly practical data regarding the quality of students' holistic educational experiences. While thriving as a construct finds its roots partially in retention literature, the theory is founded on the premise that a successful college experience consists of more than simply completion of a degree (Kenzie, 2012). As such, thriving breaks new ground by offering a nuanced yet straightforward alternative to the predominant 'success as degree completion' paradigm.

The thriving model is also promising because the component scales have been shown to be significantly predictive of key success-related outcomes, including: grade point average, intention to graduate, institutional fit, satisfaction with the college experience, perception of the worth of tuition, and learning gains (Schreiner, Pothoven, et al., 2009). Importantly, students' thriving scores contributed an additional 11 to 23% of the variance in these outcomes after accounting for student input characteristics and institutional differences (Schreiner, 2012; Schreiner, Nelson, McIntosh, & Edens, 2011). In addition, "[b]ecause thriving is characterized by aspects of a student's experiences or perspectives that are amenable to change, there is enormous potential for institutions to design interventions that will enable a greater number of students to succeed" (Schreiner,

2012, p. 2). Thriving therefore stands to make a critical contribution by filling a significant gap in prevailing approaches to student success.

### **Strengths as a Pathway to Well-Being**

Within positive psychology's quest for understanding well-being, a primary area of emphasis has been the identification and development of human strengths, talents, and virtues (Seligman, 1998; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011). Strengths are often understood as capacities of thinking, feeling, or doing that enable high or even optimal functioning toward desired ends (Linley & Harrington, 2006; Rettew & Lopez, 2008). Proponents of intentional focus on individuals' strengths believe that leveraging these aptitudes will lead to increased satisfaction and effectiveness in various areas. For example, strengths use has been shown to be a meaningful avenue for pursuing personal goals, which can contribute to increased well-being (Linley et al., 2010). Considerable research has linked the use of strengths with gains in various indicators and measures of well-being (Govindji & Linley, 2007; Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2010; Snyder, Lopez, & Pedrotti, 2011). The majority of research associating strengths and well-being within positive psychology has utilized a strengths classification scheme known as the Values in Action (VIA) inventory (Linley et al., 2010). To date, the VIA has had limited practical and research application with college students.

In contrast, an inventory called StrengthsFinder has been widely adopted across college and university campuses (Bowers & Lopez, 2010; Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2005). However, research on such programs and efforts has not traditionally considered

measures of well-being as primary outcomes. More specifically, studies have yet to explore the effects of strengths-based efforts using the thriving construct. Although the elements of the nascent thriving construct have been demonstrated to be malleable (Schreiner, 2012), extant literature on effective pathways to student thriving is limited. In the 2012 book titled *Thriving in Transitions: A Research-Based Approach to College Student Success*, Louis and Schreiner devote a full chapter to the notion that initiatives aimed at helping students discover and cultivate unique individual talents are likely to contribute to student thriving. Noting that “a strengths perspective seeks to leverage the positive qualities of each individual with the ultimate goal of optimizing achievement, well-being, or character development” (Louis & Schreiner, 2012, p. 19), these authors contend that strengths-based approaches are well-suited for efforts seeking to enhance student thriving.

### **The First Year in College**

Dedication to a guiding vision of student success is of great import for the entirety of students’ experiences, but it is particularly crucial for the first college year. The first days and months on campus are often the most challenging and the most foundational for students (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Students experience considerable transition as they leave their past lives and enter into a new environment that is, for many, entirely unfamiliar. Murphy (1989) suggests that “probably no stage of human development is as exaggerated as the first college year of the typical 18-year-old American college student” (p. 91). Consequently, student attrition is also highest between the end of the freshman year and the start of the sophomore year (Ishler &

Upcraft, 2005). Because of this, institutions direct considerable effort and resources toward supporting students as they transition into the college environment (Kuh et al., 1991). These orientation programs serve primarily to acclimate new students to the academic and social communities of the institution and are offered in some fashion by approximately 96 percent of colleges and universities (Barefoot, 2005).

Such efforts can take a wide variety of forms, both in and out of the classroom. The most common curricular intervention is some type of first-year seminar throughout the first semester that serves as an extended orientation to college life (Barefoot, 2005). Research on first-year seminars has consistently demonstrated positive outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Cuseo, 2010; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999; Hunter & Linder, 2005). First-year seminars are most frequently assessed for their impact on either academic performance or persistence (Cuseo, 2010).

Orientation programs are ubiquitous across college and university campuses and are seen as essential experiences for incoming students as they acclimate to their new communities. These interventions are often grounded in Tinto's theory of student departure (Engberg & Mayhew, 2007), and many find their explicit purpose in bolstering institutions' student retention rates (Barefoot, 2000). While the effectiveness of transition programs tends to be well-supported by literature, a persistent criticism of this research is a self-selection bias or volunteer effect that may favorably skew results (Melguizo, 2011; Perrine & Spain, 2008). This concern suggests that the students who choose to participate in orientation programs—many of which are optional—may already demonstrate important differences in preexisting characteristics compared to

non-participants. Additionally, examining a program's effect on retention likely means a delay of months or even years between the intervention itself and the measured outcome. Such a scenario poses challenges for asserting the effectiveness of these programs. Finally, exclusive attention to retention provides no data about the experience of students or how they may have changed as a result of their time in college.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The present study explores the effects of a first-year seminar with a strengths-based curriculum on measures of college student well-being during the first semester. Student well-being is conceptualized as thriving and is measured by the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, McIntosh, et al., 2009). A quasi-experimental design is used, with a control group of students who were enrolled in sections of a first-year seminar in which the curriculum was not strengths-based. Though true random assignment of participants to either treatment or control sections was not possible, students enrolled and registered in various sections of the seminar with no knowledge of distinctions between sections. Participants completed pretest surveys of the Thriving Quotient on the first day of the seminar, as well as posttest surveys on the final day.

Participants in the study were enrolled as full-time students and entered the university as first-year students with fewer than 30 college-level credits. The study took place at a large, selective private university in the southwestern United States.

### **Research Questions**

The study will seek to address the following questions:

1) Are there significant differences in measures of thriving before and after students participate in a strengths-based first-year seminar (treatment condition) or a non-strengths-based first-year seminar (control condition)?

2) Are there significant differences in measures of student thriving between students who participate in a strengths-based first-year seminar and those who participate in a non-strengths-based first-year seminar, after controlling for pre-seminar measures of thriving?

3) Are specific factors of student thriving affected to greater degrees as a result of student participation in a strengths-based first-year seminar?

### **Hypotheses**

H<sub>1</sub>: Participants in both the treatment condition (strengths-based curriculum) and control condition (non-strengths-based curriculum) will demonstrate increases in measures of thriving from pretest scores to posttest scores.

H<sub>2</sub>: Participants in the strengths-based first-year seminar sections will demonstrate higher levels of thriving than participants in non-strengths-based sections.

H<sub>3</sub>: Factors related to interpersonal and intrapersonal thriving will show the greatest difference.

### **Significance of the Study**

Transitioning to and matriculating through the first year of college pose unique challenges for students. This time is widely recognized as most critical to students' success in their college years, as well as to their decisions about persisting at or withdrawing from particular institutions. Much of the scholarly and professional work

on first-year students relies heavily on Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) seminal notions of student departure and the importance of both academic and social integration. His and others' subsequent research brought student retention into the forefront of discourse on student success. Retention is now a familiar marker of institutional effectiveness, as well as an oft-cited goal in and of itself for many colleges and universities. Nevertheless, there is growing interest in conceptualizations of success that extend beyond student persistence and seek to understand holistic well-being. The emerging construct of *thriving* offers a broad view of student success that may be useful for painting a more robust picture of students' adjustment to and functioning in the life of the institution. Researchers interested in well-being have found that an emphasis on personal strengths and talents —particularly through their intentional usage and development—can positively contribute to both social and psychological well-being, which are core components of the thriving model.

Additionally, literature suggests that first-year seminars can be effective interventions for supporting students through the difficulties of the freshman year. While some studies have examined the influence of first-year seminars that specifically focus on strengths, such research has often explored the effects of such initiatives on student retention rather than overall well-being. Research has also not yet been undertaken to investigate the effects of specific orientation programs on student thriving. In light of these gaps in extant literature, a study on the effects of a strengths-based first-year seminar on student thriving is timely and poised to make an important contribution to literature and practice.

## **Definition of Terms**

*Clifton StrengthsFinder* is an online assessment tool that measures individuals' talents based on responses to item pairs. After completing the assessment, an individual is provided his or her top 5 strongest results from an inventory of 34 unique talent themes. These talent themes have been identified based upon the work of educational psychologist Donald Clifton (Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

*First-year full-time college student* is a student with fewer than 30 college-level academic credits, who—for the purpose of this study—is enrolled in at least 12 credits in the current semester.

*Orientation programs* are formal initiatives utilized by colleges and universities to support new students as they transition into the institutional community and to prepare them for a rich and successful college experience (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989).

*Strength* is broadly defined as “a capacity for feeling, thinking, and behaving in a way that allows optimal functioning in the pursuit of valued outcomes” (Rettew & Lopez, 2008, p. 2). An individual's natural talent can be cultivated into a strength through investment of knowledge acquisition and skill development (Clifton & Harter, 2003).

*Strengths-based* is a term used to describe programs and efforts that seek to help students identify, affirm, and leverage their individual talents and strengths.

*Talent* is defined as “any recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied” (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p. 48).

*Thriving* represents a holistic conceptualization of college student success that emphasizes well-being and optimal functioning within three key areas: academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson & McIntosh, 2009).

*Thriving Quotient* is a 25-item research instrument designed to measure the presence of thriving in college students. The instrument measures thriving across 5 scales: 1) Engaged Learning, 2) Academic Determination, 3) Positive Perspective, 4) Social Connectedness, and 5) Diverse Citizenship (Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson & McIntosh, 2009).

*UI000* is a New Student Experience course at Baylor University that serves as an extended orientation experience to support students in their transition into the college environment. The course has six meetings that span students' first ten weeks at the university.

## **CHAPTER II**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

#### **Introduction**

Higher education is an industry in which a wide range of constituents have considerable stake. Students themselves stand to reap personal developmental benefits in virtually all areas of life (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991), including enhanced social, cultural, and economic capital. “Over their working lives, typical college graduates earn about 73 percent more than typical high school graduates, and those with advanced degrees earn two to three times as much as high school graduates” (Baum & Payea, 2005). There is therefore a tremendous private benefit of higher education that accrues to individual students and alumni. Higher education also serves an important need in the public sphere as educated graduates move into roles throughout all areas of society. Higher levels of education are associated with better overall health, greater civic engagement—such as voting, blood donation, and volunteerism—as well as lower rates of unemployment, incarceration, and poverty (Baum & Payea, 2005). While college graduates are less likely to rely on public assistance services themselves, they contribute higher levels of tax dollars that are used to support such programs. Former students take with them their sharpened intellects and critical thinking skills as they contribute in myriad ways to the institutions and communities of which they are a part. Thus, higher education also has an impact on specific organizational contexts, such as the individual companies that employ graduates. Additionally, colleges and universities partner and

collaborate with a spectrum of entities and industries for activities as diverse as research and the creation of new knowledge to community service and cultural programs. In very real ways, higher education's influence reaches far beyond the ivory tower.

Society at-large is deeply invested in the success of the enterprise of higher education. Quality educational experiences for students mean bright futures for families, communities, businesses, non-profit organizations, governmental entities, and more. Ultimately, the success of colleges and universities rests upon and indeed is one and the same with the success of students themselves. A rich conceptualization of student success, along with understanding of how to challenge and support students in their pursuit of higher education, is therefore a critical necessity with significant implications.

### **Defining Student Success**

Despite the centrality of student success to the mission of higher education, the field lacks a clear and consistent articulation of the desired outputs of a college experience. Businesses can readily point to profit measures as the ultimate indicator of success and the bottom line that drives decisions (Birnbaum, 1988). Yet as Braxton (2003) notes, student success is a complex, value-laden concept with multiple stakeholders. Each individual student is likely to have his or her own beliefs about success, as is each institution. For some students, such as those who may be the first in their families to attend college, the completion of any post-secondary coursework may be monumental and represent new possibilities for the entire family. Other students may consider anything short of acceptance into top graduate or professional programs as a failed undergraduate experience.

Likewise, the primary goals of individual institutions fall along a wide spectrum.

The expectations of American colleges and universities:

include (but are certainly not limited to) such lofty goals as transmitting the intellectual heritage of Western civilization; fostering a high level of verbal and mathematical skills; developing an in-depth understanding of social, cultural, and political institutions; facilitating one's ability to think reflectively, analytically, critically, synthetically, and evaluatively; developing one's value structures and moral sensibilities; facilitating personal growth and self-identity; and fostering one's sense of career identity and vocational competence. (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991, p. 1)

Additional aspirations such as the development of leadership skills and capacities, as well as strength of character and integrity, are also often considered central purposes of higher education (Dugan & Komives, 2007). Though these are noble goals indeed, they are also imprecise qualities that evade tidy definition and evaluation of accomplishment. Moreover, institutions ascribe varying levels of value to these and other priorities, adding to the challenge of articulating a clear, all-encompassing understanding of student success.

In spite of this ambiguity, research suggests there are certain developmental outcomes and characteristics that are common across effective college experiences. The foundational aim of higher education is to enhance student learning and promote intellectual, interpersonal, and intrapersonal development (King, 2003). Much of the research related to student success ultimately aims to understand what contributes to

student learning across these various developmental areas. Astin's (1977) groundbreaking research found that the influences of the college experience extend across cognitive, affective, psychological, and behavioral dimensions. Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) identified seven vectors of development in college students, which include: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity. These broad areas provide an overarching framework for identifying the primary outcomes of the college experience. Efficacy of these dimensions has been supported by extensive review of research by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991). Their analysis ultimately looked to student change as the primary—albeit nebulous—indication of the impact of college.

In addition to generally recognized outcomes that constitute student success, scholars have sought to ascertain the factors or characteristics that contribute to these outcomes. Astin (1975, 1977, 1984) emphasized the importance of *involvement*—which encompassed both quantitative and qualitative dimensions—to student development and learning. Student involvement could be considered as occurring along a continuum and in many different aspects of a student's experience. A student may exhibit high levels of involvement in certain areas and low levels in other areas. Astin's research suggests that greater levels of effort and time on task lead to increased learning. In short, “students learn by becoming involved” (Astin, 1985, p. 3). Pace (1980, 1984) also sought to understand the quality of effort that students put forth. His work led him to develop the College Student Experience Questionnaire, which examined the degree to which

students utilized campus resources, facilities, and services in their learning. Successful students tend to exhibit greater effort in availing themselves of these institutional resources.

Building on Pace's work, Kuh (2003) has used the term *engagement* to refer to “the time and energy students devote to educationally purposeful activities inside and outside the classroom” (p. 25). Research on engagement has sought to extend prior work on college student success by collecting national data about the extent to which students actually do expend meaningful effort on purposeful practices. Kuh and his colleagues (2001) began a large-scale survey initiative called the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) that provides benchmark data for institutions and helps them understand the behaviors of their own students. Importantly, this initiative has been explicitly interested in empowering institutions to create environments and conditions that promote student engagement (Kuh, 2003). Elsewhere, Kuh and colleagues (2005) have underscored that “what students do during college counts more in terms of what they learn and whether they will persist in college than who they are or even where they go to college” (p. 8).

Recent research conducted by Gallup, Inc. and Purdue University (2014) echoes a similar refrain, suggesting that “when it comes to finding the secret to success, it's not ‘where you go,’ it's ‘how you do it’ that makes all the difference in higher education” (p. 6). How students approach their involvement in learning appears to influence the outcomes. *Deep learning* describes a desire to truly understand new material and concepts and to relate new information to current knowledge. In contrast, *surface*

*learning* is concerned primarily with memorization of information and devotes little attention to integrating new knowledge with existing understanding. A deep approach to learning leads to greater retention of information and increased ability to employ new knowledge in new and creative ways (Marton & Saljo, 1976; Biggs, 1987). Not surprisingly, students' overall learning experiences within the college environment are dependent in large part on the type, amount, and quality of effort they expend.

For all that may contribute to and make up a meaningful experience in college, the inescapable reality is that the enduring fruits of higher education cannot be realized in full without the attainment of a degree. While students may develop and benefit in a myriad of very real ways through any amount of engagement with postsecondary education, a degree itself is often the key that unlocks new career opportunities, earnings potential, enhanced social capital and other gains. In general, institutions and students alike operate within the assumption that degree attainment is the primary indication of success in college (Kuh et al., 2007).

The work of Vincent Tinto (1975, 1987, 1993) has been particularly influential in supporting this foundational notion of student success. Influenced by ideas of Durkheim (1953) and Spady (1970), Tinto sought to illuminate the factors that cause students to depart from universities without having completed a degree. His Interactionist Theory (1975) postulated that students' decisions about remaining at or leaving an institution develop over time as a result of interactions and experiences within the institutional environment. His findings stressed the importance of a student's integration into the academic and social communities of an institution to their overall college experience.

According to Tinto, “positive integration serves to raise one’s goals and strengthen one’s commitment both to those goals and to the institution within which they may be attained” (1993, p. 116). Students who exhibit lower levels of integration are less likely to remain at their institutions through completion of a degree. In Tinto’s model, persistence serves as evidence that students have become invested in and integrated into the social and intellectual aspects of institutional life.

Because of the correlation Tinto demonstrated between integration and student persistence, his framework has been instrumental in generating increased attention throughout higher education on understanding student retention. His model has been widely cited and utilized as a theoretical basis for a considerable body of literature on college students. Indeed, Tinto’s theory has enjoyed “paradigmatic status among theoretical perspectives on college student departure” (Braxton, 2003, p. 326) and is the framework most often utilized in research on student persistence (Metz, 2004). His work has been influential in shaping research on student success as well. Braxton (2003) captures a critical underlying assumption in persistence research by noting that “much of the literature on student retention assumes that most students enroll in colleges and universities with graduation as their primary goal. Thus, student persistence looms as a significant and essential gateway for student success, success for both the individual student and the institution” (p. 319). Due in large part to the weight of Tinto’s work, research and practice in higher education commonly equate student success with persistence (Melguizo, 2011).

## **Widespread Focus on Retention**

College student retention “is easily one of the most widely studied topics in higher education over the past thirty years” (Tinto, 2005, p. ix). Yet despite this attention, the attrition rate has stayed relatively stable over this same time. The national average persistence rate for four-year institutions in 1983 was 75.5 percent, compared to 72.4 percent in 2010. For two-year institutions, the persistence rate was 56.8 percent in 1983 and 56.0 percent in 2010 (Mortenson, 2012). For all that has been gained and learned, much about student persistence remains enigmatic.

Attention to retaining students heightened following a rapid growth in enrollment throughout higher education in the first half of the twentieth century. Completion of a college degree became increasingly important for attainment of professional and managerial jobs in industrial America. Demand for higher education prompted the growth of existing institutions, as well as the creation of many new institutions. These changes also provided greater access to higher education, which fundamentally altered the college landscape. Students from a wide range of educational backgrounds were now entering colleges and universities, and institutions faced new challenges as they sought to educate and graduate an increasingly diverse student population (Berger & Lyon, 2005). During this period, there emerged a “growing recognition that student satisfaction with and departure from college was more complicated than a simple matter of academic fit and success” (Berger & Lyon, p. 17, 2005). Consequently, researchers and theorists began to build a knowledge base to shed light on the complex influences on student departure.

## **Theories of Student Retention**

Four major strands of theory emerged as student degree completion captured the collective attention of the field (Tinto, 1986). Economic perspectives assert that students make decisions about continued pursuit of a degree at a particular institution by way of cost-benefit analysis (Becker, 1964). Financial needs and the availability of student aid are also viewed as critical factors in students' persistence within these perspectives (St. John, Cabrera, Nora, & Asker, 2000). Organizational concepts of retention focus on the structures, behaviors, and characteristics of institutions. These notions hypothesize that characteristics such as size and selectivity, faculty to student ratio, resources and facilities, and campus climate significantly shape student perceptions of their level of fit with the institution, as do patterns of organizational functioning and decision-making (Tinto, 1986; Braxton, 2003). In addition, sociological and psychological perspectives of retention have been developed to further understand student persistence.

Sociological understandings of student persistence “generally involve a search for commonalities of behavior that distinguish groups of students who remain enrolled in an institution from groups of students who leave” (Kinzie, 2012, p. xv). By far the most widely referenced theory on retention was originally introduced by Vincent Tinto in 1975. Tinto believed that students' incoming characteristics—such as family background, prior educational experiences, and personal attributes—were an important part of the persistence equation. As previously mentioned, his Interactionist Theory (1975) contended that a student's level of fit with a particular institution would be predicated on the interplay between the college's culture and environment and the

qualities that person brought into that environment. Astin (1993) proposed the “Inputs-Environment-Outputs” (I-E-O) model, another well-known framework within the sociological perspective. As with Tinto’s theory, this model suggests that students bring a set of inputs into the higher education environment, the interaction amongst which leads to outputs in the form of graduates.

Psychological attempts to understand student persistence comprise the fourth major theoretical category. Theories within this segment were particularly popular following World War II (Braxton, 2003), although perhaps the most comprehensive model was proposed in 2000 by Bean and Eaton. In advancing their Psychological Model of Student Retention, they point out that their “assumption in developing this model is that the factor in question, leaving college, is a behavior and that behavior is psychologically motivated” (Bean & Eaton, 2000, p. 49). Drawing from psychological theories such as attitude-behavior theory (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), coping behavioral theory, self-efficacy theory (Bandura, 1997), and attribution theory (Weiner, 1986), they contend that sociological factors should be considered subordinate to psychological factors. According to the psychological model, social and academic integration—and ultimately persistence—are products of students’ psychological processes as they interact with and within the institutional environment.

### **Factors Influencing Student Persistence**

Research within these categories of theory regarding students’ persistence decisions has greatly contributed to scholarly and professional practice. Significant insight has been gained about causes of retention. At a broad level, “we find that

students reenroll when they are having an exciting, substantive, learning and personal growth experience that they can relate to their future development and success” (Noel, 1985, p. 2). Yet research has also endeavored to better understand the impact of specific aspects of the college experience, environment, and student characteristics on persistence. The literature on retention has primarily examined attributes and characteristics of the students themselves, environmental factors and institutional practices, and the interaction of students and environments. An overview of what has been learned about each of these areas will be provided.

Students enter higher education from vastly different educational, economic, and geographic backgrounds. They also bring a host of individual expectations, needs, and behaviors into the college environment. Research suggests that many of these unique characteristics can influence the likelihood that students will continue to completion of a degree. Tinto (1993) asserts that “in many respects departure is a highly idiosyncratic event, one that can be fully understood only by referring to the understandings and experiences of each and every person who departs” (p. 37). Still, some themes appear evident across the literature. There is general agreement that:

For traditional, residential college students entering college after high school, retention is greatest where students of very high ability enroll in very high quality academic programs. Similarly, college completion is lowest at low-status institutions with open-admissions policies. When the student and institution are matched, so that the institution wants what the student has to offer and the

student wants what the college has to offer, retention is likely to improve. (Bean, 2005, p. 233)

This underscores the significance of the academic ability and preparation of the individual student.

Astin and Oseguera (2005) conducted a large-scale study using national data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program's annual survey of entering first-year students. Their findings generally aligned with previous research on the relationship between certain pre-college characteristics and degree attainment. In their study, women completed degrees at higher rates than men; family income level and educational attainment of parents were positively related to degree completion; and high school GPA was the most predictive of persistence to degree of any pre-enrollment attribute. They noted that "standardized test scores and high school grades have consistently been shown to be among the strongest predictors of degree attainment among undergraduates" (Astin & Oseguera, 2005), particularly for White students. However, these factors are less predictive of persistence for Black students (Fleming & Garcia, 1998).

Tinto (1993) also identified students' intentions and commitments as influential to their persistence. Intentions refer to students' educational and vocational goals and the role that degree completion has in achieving those aspirations. Not surprisingly, the greater the perceived benefit of higher education to goal achievement, the more likely students are to persist. Others have advocated the influence of intentions on subsequent behavior (Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), including when that behavior is remaining in or leaving college (Bean & Eaton, 2000; Bean, 2005). Commitment can be seen primarily

through willingness to put forth required effort and motivation to achieve goals. Tinto further distinguished between goal and institutional commitments. The former relates to commitment to personal goals, while the latter refers to a student's commitment to a particular institution. A desire to achieve one's personal goals within a specific institutional context is particularly influential on persistence.

In addition to student characteristics, aspects of the institutional environment may also influence students' experiences and persistence decisions. Berger (2000) demonstrated that organizational behavior can affect educational outcomes. His longitudinal study grouped institutions into three types based on five key aspects of organizational behavior—bureaucratic, collegial, political, symbolic, and systemic—and examined the impact of these characteristics on measures of humanistic values and community service involvement. He found that “the consistent pattern of changes for both types of outcome in all three types of organizational environments supports the assumption that organizational behavior at colleges affects both psychological and behavioral outcomes” (Berger, 2000, p. 188). In addition to the impact of organizational behaviors on student outcomes, factors such as involvement of students in decision making, institutional communication, and the fair administration and application of university policies have been shown to impact social integration and intent to reenroll (Berger & Braxton, 1998).

Much of the retention literature has focused on the interaction of students and the college environment. Of particular importance within these types of models is “the meaning the individual student ascribes to their relationship with the formal and

informal dimensions of the collegiate environment (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997, p. 108). As discussed, Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) Interactionalist Theory has been highly influential in subsequent research on student retention and departure. His model's pillars of academic and social integration in particular have resonated with scholars and practitioners alike. Tinto (1993) argues that "though prior dispositions and attributes may influence the college career and may, in some cases, lead directly to departure, their impact is contingent on the quality of individual interactions with other members of the institution and on the individual's perception of the degree to which those experiences meet his/her needs and interests" (p. 45).

As indicated by the vast array of approaches developed to understand retention, students' decisions about remaining in or leaving college are complex and influenced by an indefinite set of factors. Early departure from college has thus been described as an ill-structured problem that cannot be fully addressed by a single approach or perspective (Braxton & Mundy, 2001-2002). Indeed, no single theory presents a comprehensive approach for predicting or preventing student departure. Inadequacies have been pointed out in virtually all major constructs for understanding this phenomena, Tinto's formative work included.

Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) model of departure has spawned considerable studies utilizing his framework. Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) pointed out, however, that despite the paradigmatic status of Tinto's model, there was little evidence of the empirical consistency of the key propositions of the model. Their review suggested strong support from single-institution studies for four of thirteen propositions:

1. Students bring to college different entry characteristics which will impact their initial commitment to the institution.
2. A student's initial commitment to the institution will impact the student's future commitment to the institution.
3. Students' continued commitment to the institution is enhanced by the level of social integration they realize early on.
4. The greater the level of commitment to the institution, the higher the likelihood of the student being retained through graduation. (quoted in Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 24)

Limited support was found for Tinto's other propositions. Importantly, the study by Braxton, Sullivan, and Johnson (1997) suggested "that social integration, not academic integration, is key to understanding student departure" (Berger & Lyon, 2005, p. 24).

Other major criticisms of Tinto have been directed at the anthropological conceptual underpinnings of the theory (Attinasi, 1989; Tierney, 1992) and the lack of applicability for commuter campuses (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997). Today's student population is also significantly more diverse than when Tinto originally published his model. Accordingly, questions have been raised about the fit of Tinto's core concepts for non-majority students (Melguizo, 2011).

### **Broader Notions of Student Success**

As noted, Tinto's (1975, 1987) model emphasizing academic and social integration serves as a grounding framework for much of professional practice and subsequent research in many areas related to college student success (Engberg &

Mayhew, 2007). Tinto viewed student persistence primarily through a sociological lens, arguing that one's degree of integration into the institutional community was most influential in decisions about matriculating at the institution. While he acknowledged the influence of other factors in retention, social and intellectual integration played the dominant roles in his model. Others, most notably Bean and Eaton (2000), have advocated for increased attention on psychological aspects of student persistence. While such scholars have built upon Tinto's work and proposed additional factors that influence retention, others have sought to expand the notion of student success beyond mere persistence. Kinzie (2012) highlights the importance of a more comprehensive conceptualization of student success by noting that "expanded definitions attend to the quality of the experience and the content of the learning environment, student perceptions and behaviors, the attainment of educational and personal objectives, what students accomplish, and how they develop while in college" (p. xix). In *Challenging and Supporting the First Year Student: A Handbook for Improving the First Year of College*, Upcraft, Gardner, and Barefoot (2005) suggest an understanding of success that includes: developing intellectual and academic competence, establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships, exploring identity development, deciding on a career, maintaining health and wellness, considering faith and the spiritual dimensions of life, developing multicultural awareness, and developing civic responsibility. Definitions such as these underscore the myriad dimensions in which college students learn and develop, and also point out the inadequacy of retention alone to demonstrate student change in these many areas. Though relying on retention as a primary indicator of

student success is relatively straightforward and may satisfy many institutional needs, adopting a richer notion of success requires a robust theory that addresses this range of developmental dimensions.

The challenge of envisioning a comprehensive conceptualization of student success is considerable. Such a notion must be sufficiently broad to encompass the multitude of developmental opportunities college students encounter. It must, at the same time, achieve a certain level of precision and articulation that allows for clear understanding and practical application. Scholars are recognizing the importance of models of student success that seek to nurture growth and potential rather than simply prevent student departure. An emerging area of thought and research called positive psychology, which focuses on understanding factors that enable and foster human achievement and vitality, offers intriguing insights and possibilities for how higher education views student growth, potential, and success. Positive psychology has also led the most pronounced charge in shifting from a predominant focus on prevention of negative outcomes toward actualization of positive ones.

### **Positive Psychology: A Focus on Well-Being**

Believing that psychology ought to be contributing to knowledge of human thriving and living well, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) introduced the contrarian notion of positive psychology with the hopes of redirecting the efforts, investigations, and language of the field. At its most basic, “positive psychology aims to help people live and flourish rather than merely to exist” (Keyes & Haidt, 2003, p. 3). Such an outlook represents a paradigm shift for a field of science that, for the second

half of the twentieth century, has been largely driven by pathology. Since World War II, psychology has operated within a disease framework that has focused on healing damage and suffering (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). This ‘medical model’ has resulted in a passive or reactive stance regarding mental health; practitioners in the field of psychology respond to deficiencies or problems and seek to restore individuals to more healthy or normal levels of functioning (Cowen & Kilmer, 2002). The burgeoning, multifaceted arena of positive psychology aims to discover what enables people to go beyond normal and live lives of meaning, fulfillment, and success (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Aspinwall and Staudinger (2003) suggest that one possible reason for psychology’s reparative approach is the relative ease of bringing an individual back to a prior state, in comparison to defining the levels of excellence which that individual might be capable of achieving. Additionally, Keyes and Haidt (2003) affirm that “utilitarianism, compassion, and a concern for equality suggest that people in great pain should be helped before those who are not suffering” (p. 3). Others have also noted that humans have historically fixated on the negative for survival; inability or weakness has at times had costly repercussions for the meeting of basic human needs (Rettew & Lopez, 2008). Seligman (2002) argues, however, that the primary impetus for psychology’s adoption of a disease model has been economic. Prior to the second world war, psychology demonstrated a threefold concern for a) curing mental illness, b) helping people live fulfilling and productive lives, and c) identifying and cultivating human talent. After the war, the founding of two organizations—the Veterans

Administration and the National Institute of Mental Health—prompted many psychologists to pursue funding opportunities related to the treatment of mental illness and pathology. Psychology “became a victimology” (Seligman, 2002, p. 4) and largely abandoned its attention to human thriving (Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Seligman, 2003). The vast majority of research in the latter half of the twentieth century was consequently aimed at identifying the causes and cures of stress, maladjustment, and mental disease (Eisenberg & Ota Wang, 2003).

Maddux (2002) believes that the cumulative effect of the shift toward pathology has also altered the grounding assumptions of the profession. Psychologists approach their work as doctors treat patients—diagnosing internal problems and prescribing treatments. Language and “terms emphasize abnormality over normality, maladjustment over adjustment, and sickness over health” (Maddux, 2002, p. 14). This stance is plainly evidenced by the structure and scope of psychology’s sacred text, the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)*. This all-important book defines and categorizes recognized mental illnesses and serves as the foundational document for the field. In no uncertain terms, Maddux (2002) contends that the views of the *DSM* and positive psychology regarding human experience are in direct opposition with one another. Rather than seeking only to identify weaknesses and offer treatment, positive psychologists desire to understand sources and types of human strengths and how such virtues can be developed in individuals (Snyder & Lopez, 2007).

In their seminal piece calling for a positive approach to mental health and wellness, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) urged psychologists and practitioners

to reframe their shared profession and their individual outlooks regarding the people with whom they worked. Their call was for psychology to renew its commitment to understanding lives of fulfillment and human talent. Since that time, the concept of positive psychology has fallen on fertile soil and proliferated in many directions (Gable & Haidt, 2005). While the trend toward positive psychology explores human vitality, it does not argue that psychology's pendulum should swing entirely toward either the positive or negative. Rather, this movement seeks to redress the balance between mental illness and mental health (Keyes & Haidt, 2003; Shushok & Hulme, 2006).

Key beliefs about human well-being form the bedrock of positive psychology and drive scholarly inquiry. Practitioners, researchers, educators, and other professionals in this field seek to promote human flourishing and worthwhile living (Keyes & Haidt, 2003); engagement, meaning, and purpose (Shushok & Hulme, 2006); prevention and buffering against mental disorders (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000); satisfaction with life and human thriving (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Positive psychology emphasizes that mental health is not simply the absence of mental illness. Keyes (2002) used the term languishing to describe "a state in which an individual is devoid of positive emotion toward life, is not functioning well psychologically or socially, and has not been depressed during the past year" (p. 294). Individuals who are languishing may be characterized by feelings of emptiness and lack of purpose, but they are not considered depressed. In contrast, Keyes employed the term *flourishing* to signify positive outlook on life and psychological and social well-being. The ideas of human

flourishing and positive psychology offer the possibility of the pursuit of well-being rather than simply the avoidance or prevention of mental illness.

### **Thriving as a Model for Student Success**

Positive psychology's explicit emphasis on well-being and nurturing uniqueness and excellence has been embraced by many in higher education. The notion of *thriving* (Schreiner, 2010a) draws heavily from Keyes' understanding of flourishing, with an additional academic dimension that is unique to the college context. Thriving also finds its roots within the literature on student persistence and builds most directly on the psychological model of retention proffered by Bean and Eaton (2000). The thriving construct is purposefully broad and attempts to capture the positive contributions from the literature on student success and psychological well-being. Schreiner (2012) describes thriving students as:

not only succeeding academically, but they are also engaged in the learning process, investing effort to reach important educational goals, managing their time and commitments effectively, connected in healthy ways to other people, optimistic about their futures, positive about their present choices, appreciative of differences in others, and committed to enriching their community. (p. 5)

Thriving includes three foundational areas of academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development, together forming a holistic construct of individual well-being. These themes are comprised of five factors: 1) Engaged Learning, 2) Academic Determination, 3) Positive Perspective, 4) Diverse Citizenship, and 5) Social Connectedness.

Academic thriving is made up of Engaged Learning and Academic Determination. Engaged Learning connotes psychological investment and effort in the learning process. Academic Determination speaks to students' motivation to succeed academically, their willingness to take the steps necessary to do so, and their ability to self-regulate their behaviors to achieve their goals (Schreiner, 2010a).

Positive Perspective, the single factor representing intrapersonal thriving, reflects a healthy outlook regarding one's life and an ability to effectively deal with and manage circumstances. Students who are thriving intrapersonally have a positive sense of self and employ healthy coping skills as they navigate the college environment (Schreiner, 2012). Central to Positive Perspective are concepts of optimism (Carver, Scheier, Miller, & Fulford, 2009) and subjective well-being (Diener, Suh, Lucas, & Smith, 1999).

Interpersonal thriving consists of Social Connectedness and Diverse Citizenship. Social Connectedness implies a sense of belonging and community and indicates an ability to develop and maintain close, healthy relationships. The final factor, Diverse Citizenship, "is a combination of openness and valuing of differences in others, along with a desire to make a contribution to one's community and the confidence to do so" (Schreiner, 2012, p. 8).

A critical emphasis of thriving is that each factor represents areas of well-being that are fluid and can be influenced by the college environment. Consequently, the model serves as a robust conceptualization of student success that not only synthesizes existing knowledge on important aspects of a meaningful educational experience, but also provides instruction as to essential areas of student development toward which

colleges and universities can meaningfully direct resources and attention. While persistence to degree may continue to be an important aspect of examining student success, graduation alone does not provide a multi-faceted understanding of the quality of students' engagement and experiences during the college years (Kinzie, 2012). Thriving, therefore, seeks a richer understanding of student success and well-being that captures students' perceptions, intentions, and activities.

### **Attention to Human Strengths**

From the onset of the positive psychology movement, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) recognized that among the most foundational needs for a successful investment in the positive contributions of psychology would be rich investigation about individual talents and potential:

Psychologists need now to call for massive research on human strengths and virtues. Practitioners need to recognize that much of the best work they already do in the consulting room is to amplify strengths rather than repair the weaknesses of their clients.... No longer do the dominant theories view the individual as a passive vessel responding to stimuli; rather, individuals are now seen as decision makers, with choices, preferences, and the possibility of becoming masterful, efficacious. (p. 8)

Indeed, emphasis on human strengths has been a major contributor in the growth of the positive psychology perspective.

As positive psychologists have begun to respond to the charge of identifying and developing strengths, there has been need for common understanding and core

assumptions that undergird this ever-expanding subfield. Seligman (2003) has offered three applications of positive psychology which he believes to be its central purposes: 1) assessing human strengths and health, 2) intervening by identifying how strengths can be developed, and 3) understanding the development of strengths throughout the lifespan. Building on these applications, Seligman (2003) suggests four aims that can guide the emerging field into the future: 1) prevention of disease and illness through buffering and leveraging individual strengths, 2) training psychologists and other professionals to promote strengths systematically and scientifically, 3) scaling back the victimology inherent in the current practice of psychology, and 4) shifting psychology's focus to inspiring individuals and humanity toward prosocial or philanthropic behavior. These foundational assertions help to unify the varied pursuits and areas of investigation that fall under the umbrella of positive psychology.

Collectively, positive psychology embraces the thought that success and excellence come from building on innate talents and strengths rather than working to minimize weaknesses (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Rettew & Lopez, 2008). Although multiple classifications and categorizations of strengths have emerged since the turn of the twenty-first century, these approaches essentially work from a shared premise about the nature of human strengths. A strength can be defined as “a capacity for feeling, thinking, and behaving in a way that allows optimal functioning in the pursuit of valued outcomes” (Rettew & Lopez, 2008, p. 2). Thus, strengths are patterns of normal performance and represent individuals' natural ways of viewing the world and operating within it.

From these collective supports have sprung various attempts to identify and articulate the range of human strengths. Positive psychologists have sought an alternative to the *DSM* that classifies strengths and virtues rather than illness and pathology (Maddux, 2002; Seligman, 2003). Two inventories in particular have garnered widespread use and familiarity within the scientific community and beyond. Peterson and Seligman (2004) introduced the Values in Action (VIA) Classification of Strengths that included 24 strengths within six broad virtues—wisdom and knowledge, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. In contrast to the *DSM*, the VIA was intended to serve as a strengths-focused approach to diagnosis and treatment (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). A second classification is the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Gallup Organization, 1999), which is based on extensive research by the educational psychologist Donald Clifton. In partnership with the Gallup Organization, Clifton developed a bank of 34 talent themes that could be cultivated into strengths (Snyder & Lopez, 2007). StrengthsFinder is presented in greater detail in a later section.

Positive psychology in particular has taken a keen interest in examining potential linkages between human strengths and well-being, irrespective of which specific tool or inventory may be utilized. Importantly, a growing literature base supports a range of benefits associated with the use of strengths, including: improved psychological well-being (Govindji & Linley, 2007) and subjective well-being (Proctor, Maltby, & Linley, 2010; Govindji & Linley, 2007); lower levels of depression (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) and stress (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011); greater progress toward goal achievement, leading to increased need satisfaction and well-being

over time (Linley, Nielsen, Gillett, & Biswas-Diener, 2010); and higher levels of engagement (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002) and performance in the workplace (Corporate Leadership Council, 2002; Stefanyszyn, 2007).

### **Strengths-Based Efforts in Higher Education**

Born out of more than thirty years of research exploring successful individuals and “what is right with people” (Hodges & Harter, 2005, p. 191), strengths-based approaches encourage the cultivation of virtues and innate talents (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). This movement has been complemented by the growth of the broader concept of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which has attempted to shift the focus of psychology away from a deficit correction model toward an appreciation and affirmation of human strengths and positive mindsets. A foundational premise of strengths theory is that effort invested in developing inherent strengths will result in considerably higher gains than the same amount of effort devoted to improving weaknesses (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Aspects of positive psychology, including strengths identification and development, have been explored in a variety of settings and fields (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2007). Higher education has been particularly receptive to and interested in helping students identify and nurture talents. Accordingly, colleges and universities have developed and utilized an array of strengths-based programs and initiatives.

According to Bowers and Lopez (2010), nearly 500 universities and colleges throughout the nation have used some type of strengths-based programming. Such efforts are typically grounded in the use of the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Lopez, Hodges,

& Harter, 2005), an online assessment tool that measures individuals' talents based on responses to item pairs. After completing the assessment, an individual is provided his or her top 5 or strongest talent themes. A talent is defined as "any recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied" (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p. 48), and StrengthsFinder identifies 34 possible talent themes. Each talent can be cultivated into a strength, which is "consistent near perfect performance in an activity" (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001, p. 25), through investment in the form of knowledge acquisition and skill enhancement. Though there exists a great diversity of applications and programs based on strengths and talents, the StrengthsFinder inventory serves as the cornerstone upon which these initiatives are often built (Bowers & Lopez, 2010). An accompanying resource that is often used in postsecondary environments is StrengthsQuest (Clifton & Anderson, 2002), which "is a student-development and -engagement program designed to help high school and college students achieve success in academics, career, and life" (Hodges & Harter, 2005, p. 190). These resources have been utilized in many contexts on college and university campuses, including academic and career counseling, residence life, first-year seminars, new student orientation, academic courses, organization advising, and leadership programs (Hodges & Harter, 2005).

A focus on strengths in education is advocated by Lopez and Louis (2009) as a philosophical approach with broad interdisciplinary underpinnings, including psychology, education, social work, and organizational behavior and theory. As with positive psychology, strengths-based efforts seek to reframe outlooks toward people and

institutions by emphasizing what is good over what is bad (Shushok & Hulme, 2006). Anderson (2005) discusses the focus on deficiencies and remediation that has characterized postsecondary education, contending that such a perspective remains the dominant paradigm at many colleges and universities. Within this framework, institutions operate based on the assumption that students must possess certain core skills and competencies in order to succeed in college. Accordingly, assessment initiatives and remedial courses are implemented that seek to identify potential shortcomings and improve students' base knowledge or ability in these key areas. This view presupposes that students who leave institutions or see little development lack important skills needed for success. However, Anderson (2005) argues that, in reality, "more students leave because of disillusionment, discouragement, or reduced motivation than because of lack of ability or dismissal by the school administration" (p. 183). Rather than fixating on pathology, the strengths perspective encourages an exploration of the unique qualities of each individual and a journey of self-understanding that ignites students' passions and intrinsic motivations (Shushok & Hulme, 2006).

Educators can facilitate students' recognition and development of their strengths by embracing and actively employing the strengths perspective as a guiding construct in their work. Anderson (2004) encourages faculty and staff to intentionally learn about and cultivate their own strengths and talents as they strive to model such behavior to their students. Lopez and Louis (2009) outline five principles of strengths-based educational practices that seek to enable students to become committed lifelong learners: 1) the measurement of strengths as supplemental data on students and their success; 2)

individualization of teaching methods to students' specific strengths; 3) establishing and promoting networks of persons who encourage and help cultivate strengths; 4) opportunities for deliberate application of strengths both in and out of the classroom; and 5) intentional strengths development through creative experiences, interactions, and other opportunities. A campus environment that is supportive of strengths development provides greater chances for students to maximize their understanding of their personal strengths and the myriad ways they are manifested (Lopez & Louis, 2009).

Early research on the impact of strengths-based educational approaches on students suggested considerable positive effects. Self-reported data from open-ended and Likert questions revealed patterns of responses that included increased awareness of talents, increased personal confidence, increased academic confidence, increased motivation to achieve, increased confidence about the future, increased use of talents, development of strengths, improved interpersonal understandings and relationships, as well as other impacts of strengths awareness such as self-efficacy and authenticity (Anderson, 2004). As strengths-based educational practices have become more pervasive in higher education, the number and scope of research studies regarding the effects of such initiatives have greatly expanded.

Strengths-based research has been conducted in a range of areas in postsecondary education, including both in and out of classroom. Cantwell (2005) compared measures of student engagement, satisfaction with the institution, and assignment and examination scores between two sections of an introductory public speaking course. Both sections were taught by the researcher, although in one she used a traditional teaching method

and in the other she applied a strengths-based approach. Results from pre- and posttests showed significant differences in all measured areas, with students from the strengths-based course achieving higher scores. An important note is that the instrument used to measure academic engagement in Cantwell's study had limited reliability data at the time the research was conducted (Louis, 2009).

An additional study conducted by Estévez (2005) utilized the Clifton StrengthsFinder and StrengthsQuest (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) in a first-year seminar with underprepared students. Through a qualitative, phenomenological approach, Estévez studied the impact of these strengths-based efforts on students' perceived social capital and their academic engagement. Results indicated that students who approached their courses in light of their personal strengths were more engaged academically. For these students, learning about their individual strengths also contributed to higher academic motivation, relationship-building skills, and a more robust understanding of how strengths could be used in academic contexts.

Other studies have also investigated the impact of strengths-based programming on first-year students. Williamson's (2002) study compared two groups of students enrolled in English composition courses; the two groups were exposed to varying levels of strengths education. The control group completed the StrengthsFinder assessment with no additional programming, while the treatment group also attended presentations on the theory of strengths, their personal strengths, and an individual advising session about their strengths. At the end of the semester, the experimental group had significantly higher GPAs, had fewer students who did not meet the institution's

minimum academic standards, and had completed a significantly higher mean number of credits than students in the control group. Louis (2008) also studied first-year students and the effects of degrees of exposure to strengths-based educational programs. Her design included three groups of students, two of which were in first-year seminars with strengths-based curriculum and one which was in a first-year seminar without a strengths curriculum. One of the strengths-based sections was taught using a talent identification intervention approach, and the second group's curriculum was a strengths development intervention model. The latter received the greatest amount of strengths-related education and received additional instruction on incorporating necessary skills and knowledge to cultivate a talent into a strength. Louis used pre- and posttests in her study and focused on variables related to academic engagement, hope, perceived academic control, achievement goal orientation, and mindset. Students who were exposed to strengths in either format had posttest levels of perceived academic control that were significantly higher than those of students in the control group. Students in the section that used the talent identification intervention approach exhibited a stronger tendency toward a fixed mindset and a belief that personal talents were unalterable. Additionally, talent identification intervention was associated with higher levels of performance goal orientation, whereas strengths development intervention was related to learning goal orientation.

Additional research on strengths-based educational programs has also yielded favorable results. Crabtree (2002) reports that an experimental study conducted by the Gallup Organization with students at UCLA found significant differences in pre- and

posttest scores of freshmen- and sophomore-level students who completed the StrengthsQuest program. Students demonstrated increases in their sense of direction in life, confidence in themselves, and their desire to learn about and cultivate their talents and the strengths of others. In a study examining the impact of various advising styles on student persistence, Swanson (2006) compared retention rates for three groups of students who experienced different forms of advising. One group received traditional advising assistance in which a faculty member assisted students in scheduling classes. A second group met two times with an advisor, and those conversations focused additionally on students' social integration at the institution. The third group took the StrengthsFinder assessment and met two times with a staff member who was trained in strengths-based educational practices. Swanson found that the group of students who experienced strengths-based advising had significantly higher retention rates than the other two groups. One limitation of this study was that the third group of students met with student affairs staff who received additional training, whereas the first two groups met with faculty members who did not receive the same level of guidance regarding those conversations (Louis, 2009).

Noting a dearth of studies aimed at examining the relationship between strengths-based initiatives and leadership development, Lehnert (2009) explored the impact of strengths-based online learning modules on students' leadership practices. One group of student leaders completed six strengths-based leadership training modules, while a second group of leaders completed modules with a leadership training curriculum that was not strengths-based. The researcher conducted pre- and posttests to examine

students' scores in five leadership practice areas. Findings showed that students who completed the strengths-based modules showed significantly greater gains than the control group in all five areas.

Initiatives utilizing StrengthsFinder are widespread across college and university campuses and differ greatly in terms of scope, duration, and setting. Consequently, much of the literature base reflects the contextualized nature of these efforts. Many of the studies also tend to feature relatively small sample sizes, which may limit the generalizability of results. Nevertheless, evidence from existing research supports a variety of positive outcomes for college students as a result of participation in strengths-based programs.

### **Importance of the First Year in College**

Research suggests that the first year of college is particularly important for undergraduate success (Upcraft, Gardner, & Barefoot, 2005). Students experience a host of academic, social, and emotional challenges as they transition into the college environment. Vincent Tinto (1988) presented a stage model that highlighted the unique difficulties of new students' adjustment. Borrowing from the work of Van Gennep (1960), Tinto identified three key phases of the process of student integration into the university community. *Separation* occurs as students shift out of the norms, associations, and daily functioning of their prior communities. Students then experience a type of liminal space as they *transition* between their old and new settings. They are no longer engaged in their past roles and relationships in the same ways, yet they have also not fully integrated into the life of the institution. *Incorporation* takes place as students

become active members in and adopt the patterns and norms of the university community. While each student experiences these stages in different ways and to varying degrees—based on individual and environmental characteristics—the challenges of the overall transition from past habits and associations into new pose very real threats to college students’ success.

Because of the realities of this transition, the likelihood of student departure is at its highest between the first and second years (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005; Levitz & Noel, 1989; Tinto 1993). At the same time, the first year—and particularly the first semester—is a critical opportunity for students to develop positive habits, perceptions, and behaviors that will promote their long-term success. Levitz and Noel (1989) believe that “fostering student success in the freshman year is the most significant intervention an institution can make in the name of student persistence. More than any other, the freshman year presents attrition hazards that institutions must counter” (p. 65). Similarly, Nelson and Vetter (2012) emphasize that the first year of college “is the point at which supportive initiatives may have the most powerful long-term effects” (p. 41). Kuh et al. (1991) contend that the most educationally effective institutions demonstrate particularly strong commitment to students’ initial integration into the community and frontload resources and programs to support early student success.

Effective transition into the institution is a critical component of students’ overall experiences in college. In this transition, students must navigate multiple facets of their new environments. Tinto (1975, 1987) emphasized the importance of students’ integration into both the academic and social communities of their institutions,

suggesting that an inability to become successfully incorporated into either dimension of university life dramatically increases the likelihood of student attrition. Tinto's contributions have guided universities as they seek to assist students in the process of fully engaging in their campus communities.

As new students enter each semester, institutions are continually faced with the challenge of welcoming new members. Each institution has a unique milieu of norms, expectations, cultures and sub-cultures, as well as resources, physical environments, and academic and administrative structures. To assist students as they navigate the complexities of their new environments, colleges and universities offer transition programs at various points leading up to and throughout students' first semester. These programs, often referred to as orientation programs, serve an important anticipatory socialization function. The notion of anticipatory socialization, first developed by Merton (1957):

is a process or set of experiences through which individuals come to anticipate correctly the norms, values, and behavioral expectations they will encounter in a new social setting. If effective, anticipatory socialization should facilitate one's successful transition into the new setting. (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p. 403)

At a foundational level, orientation programs prepare incoming students for the opportunities and challenges they will face in the coming weeks, months, and years as members of their learning communities.

Broadly defined, "orientation is any effort to help freshmen make the transition from their previous environment to the collegiate environment and enhance their

success” (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989, p. 82). Though the specific forms and functions of orientation vary by institution, these initiatives primarily serve to welcome new students and introduce them to the opportunities and expectations of the university community. Pascarella and Ternezini (1991) advise that “new students’ initial encounters with the institution may have profound effects on subsequent levels of involvement, and these encounters should be carefully designed to socialize students to the institution’s highest educational values and goals” (p. 650). Through their transition programs, universities desire to introduce new students to institutional policies and regulations, communicate behavioral expectations, provide information about organizations and involvement opportunities, assist them in designing their academic program of study, familiarize students with services and resources, and afford opportunities to interact with faculty and fellow students (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfe, 1986). It is, however, important to note the wide range of program types, durations, and specific desired outcomes within the field of orientation programming (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989; Barefoot, 2000). Ultimately, orientation and transition programs should set new students on a trajectory of overall success within the collegiate environment.

Mullendore and Banahan (2005) suggest that institutions typically focus on four key areas in their transition programs: 1) academic activities, 2) student services, 3) cocurricular and recreational events, and 4) elements for special populations. For most colleges and universities, introducing new students to the academic life of the community is the primary aspiration of their collective orientation offerings (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989). This includes helping students familiarize themselves with program and

course offerings, understand academic requirements and expectations, navigate enrollment and registration processes, and become acquainted with resources to support their academic success. Students should also have opportunity to learn about services essential to their life as a student. Many institutions' orientation programs provide information about services such as housing, dining, transportation, counseling, health and wellness, technology, service-learning, financial aid, career planning, and more. Opportunities for involvement and student development are also important components to be covered by orientation programs. Orientation is the prime setting for institutions to articulate the benefits of engagement on campus and the array of opportunities to learn through out-of-class experiences. These programs also serve as a crucial touch point between the institution and special or underrepresented student populations (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005).

### **Research on Orientation Programs**

Focus on the first year has burgeoned since around 1980 due to mounting evidence of its significance to the remainder of the college career (Barefoot, 2000). This attention has been demonstrated in the proliferation of first-year programs, as well as in the heightened research interest in this area. This emphasis is often heavily aimed at student persistence as a primary measure of effectiveness. Because of the recognized importance of the first year of college to continued persistence, coupled with the eminence of Tinto's (1975, 1987, 1993) model within retention literature, Tinto's work has served as the primary grounding framework for the work and study of orientation programs (Engberg & Mayhew, 2007). Barefoot (2000) notes that "over the past two

decades, literally thousands of first-year programs have been created with increased retention rates as the primary, if not the sole, desired outcome” (p. 14). It is therefore no surprise that much of the literature examines the connection between orientation programs and student persistence.

The literature on the effectiveness of orientation programs at-large points to “considerable evidence that orientation programs help retain students, from summer pre-enrollment programs through programs and services offered on arrival, and throughout the freshman year” (Perigo & Upcraft, 1989, p. 85). In their extensive review of literature, Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) concluded that successful orientation programs “can lead to earlier and more enduring involvement in the academic and social systems of an institution” (p. 650), and that “with a few exceptions... the weight of evidence does suggest a statistically significant positive link between exposure to various orientation experiences and persistence, both from freshman to sophomore year and from freshman year through attainment of a bachelors degree” (p. 403). In a large-scale study by Beal and Noel (1980) of “action programs that had the greatest general impact and the greatest retention impact on campuses” (p. 34), orientation was found to be one of the three most effective strategies for positively influencing retention.

Literature on orientation programs also emphasizes that an institution’s commitment to new students must be seen as a process rather than as an individual program (Mullendore & Banahan, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Institutions are encouraged to adopt practices and create programs that best support the unique needs of their students (Barefoot, 2005) and to avoid a “one size fits all” mindset (Deggs &

Associates, 2011). To that end, a wide range of orientation initiatives that target various points in new students' transition have emerged in recent decades. Titley noted in 1985 that most programs fit one of three general models: a one to three day summer program, a fall program typically lasting about a week, or a semester-long course or seminar. Even as institutions have tailored programs to their specific constituents and contexts, these broad categories remain the most common and serve a useful descriptive function.

Perigo and Upcraft (1989) used the term "pre-enrollment programs" to describe programs that take place over the summer, and "initial enrollment programs" to refer to initiatives that occur in the days leading up to the start of the semester as well as those that continue into the first semester.

While assertions such as those of Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) support the efficacy of orientation programs in general, findings of studies on specific types of interventions often yield mixed results. Additionally, within the broad categories mentioned above, there exists considerable diversity of programmatic elements such as timing, duration, specified outcomes, and targeted populations of programs, amidst other institution-specific variables (Titley, 1985). The diversity of initiatives and the inconsistency of research findings contribute to a lack of clarity regarding the effectiveness of particular kinds of orientation programs. Evidence of the ambiguity of specific program types can be seen in the use of the term "extended orientation." The label has been used to describe week-long activities directly preceding the start of the fall semester (Soria, Clark, & Koch, 2013), first-year experience courses spanning a portion or all of the first semester (Brunelle-Joiner, 1999), as well as multiple-day

summer programs intended to explore institutional culture and norms and help new students develop relationships with other new and returning students as well as with faculty and staff (Lehning, 2008). This obscurity contributes to the challenges of demonstrating the impacts of specific kinds of initiatives. Nevertheless, insights about the impact of orientation programs can be gained from previous research.

Many institutions offer some version of a single- or two-day mid-summer orientation program. A study on the impact of a two-day summer orientation program found that participation had a significant effect on students' social integration and commitment to the institution, yet little direct effect on persistence (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986). One longitudinal study at a single institution demonstrated that participation in an orientation program resulted in a significant difference in first-semester GPA and five-year graduation rates (Busby, Gammel, & Jeffcoat, 2002). The study used matched samples based on gender and standardized test scores to demonstrate similarity prior to the orientation program. However, there was no consideration of additional variables such as race, high school grade point average, or family income level, which have been demonstrated to impact both persistence and grade point average (Ishler & Upcraft, 2005). The study also did not note potential differences—such as initial commitment to the institution or intent to graduate from the institution—between the 20 percent of students who did not participate in the program as compared to their peers who did choose to attend.

Deggs and Associates (2011) examined the impact of a one-day summer orientation program on students' knowledge of campus and overall student experience.

Measures of these dependent variables included scales related to knowledge of policies and procedures, understanding of degree requirements, relationships with faculty or staff members, participation in campus organizations and clubs, participation in campus activities, satisfaction with decision to attend the university, and intent to continue as a student. Although this voluntary orientation program occurred in the summer prior to students' first semester, the survey was administered in the following spring semester to explore the program's long-term effects. A sample of approximately 9 percent of the first-year class participated in the study, with 50 percent of respondents indicating participation in the orientation program. Statistically significant difference between participants and non-participants was found for only one item, participation in or attendance at campus activities. While research efforts to examine the sustained effects of an orientation program are warranted, the findings of this study are not particularly surprising given the brevity of the program. No attempt was made in the study to control for students' pre-college characteristics, or to account for self-selection bias in the study.

An increasingly popular type of orientation program is the mid-summer extended orientation program. Such programs are frequently advertised to students as "camp" experiences. Limited existing research on these efforts has thus far not provided strong evidence of effectiveness. Haynes and Atchley (2013) examined the impact of participation in a voluntary off-campus program on retention and academic success. They concluded that, "for this sample, it can be suggested that participation in the camp orientation program had no impact on academic engagement, academic satisfaction, student-faculty interactions, or classroom performance" (p. 87). They also found no

significant difference in retention between participants and non-participants. Lehning (2008) found small but statistically significant difference in retention and first semester grade point average between participants and non-participants of an extended orientation program at Kansas State University. However, the strength of the significance caused the researcher to conclude that little if any practical significance could be drawn.

Another common type of orientation program—often titled Welcome Week—takes place in the days immediately preceding the start of fall semester classes. Soria, Clark, and Koch (2013) conducted a study on a six-day program that occurred just prior to the beginning of fall classes. They specifically built upon research affirming the importance of social integration and sense of belonging (Tinto, 1993; Mayhew, Stipek, and Dorow, 2011; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986), in addition to examining the program’s effects on retention and GPA. For the study, researchers “presumed that students who feel a stronger institutional identity, along with greater institutional support, will more likely feel a sense of belonging at their institution and subsequently persist to their second year” (Soria, Clark, & Koch, 2013, p. 35). Approximately 85.7 percent of incoming first-year students participated in the orientation program, and 34.5 percent of all incoming first-year students were included in the sample for the study. The study considered race, gender, international status, social class, first-generation status, participation in first-year seminars, and participation in a specialized advising community as important control variables. Results of the study “suggest that Welcome Week participants had higher fall and spring semester cumulative grade point averages, retention to their second year, and sense of belonging when controlling for additional

factors, including demographics, campus climate, academic engagement, and participation in academic programs” (Soria, Clark, & Koch, 2013, pp. 42-43). As with other studies mentioned, self-selection of participants poses a limitation of the study, although controlling for key variables contributes to the weight of the findings.

Perrine and Spain (2008) also analyzed the effects of a six-day Welcome Week program, and their results indicated that participation had no statistically significant influence on student persistence, GPA, or number of credits earned. They also contend that much of the “evidence that orientation programs increase retention is scarce and methodologically flawed,” citing studies that have examined “students’ attitudes and knowledge, rather than retention” (p. 156).

A considerable body of literature does point to the efficacy of first-year seminars. In their ex post facto examination of the impact of a first-year experience course, Sidle and McReynolds (2009) found that participants had higher first to second year persistence rates, higher cumulative grade point averages, and higher ratios of earned credit hours to attempted credit hours than did non-participants. The researchers matched course participants and non-participants based on a wide range of characteristics to demonstrate initial similarity between the two groups. Strumpf and Hunt (1993) also found that a first semester orientation course had a significant impact on retention of participants, even when controlling for self-selection. Indeed, “the overwhelming majority of first-year seminar research has shown that these courses positively affect retention, grade point average, number of credit hours attempted and completed, graduation rates, student involvement in campus activities, and student attitudes and

perceptions of higher education” (Hunter & Linder, 2005, p. 288). Given the favorable research on these types of courses, it is not surprising that data from the National Survey of First-Year Seminar Programming in 2000 revealed that 74 percent of institutions who responded to the survey offered one or more first-year seminars (National Resource Center for the First-Year Experience and Students in Transition, 2002).

### **Effects of Orientation Programs Beyond Retention**

Interest in student persistence and grade point average has dominated research on orientation programs. After all, “most orientation programs focus on the specific goal of encouraging the academic success of first year college students” (Busby, Gammel, & Jeffcoat, 2002, p. 45). Yet evidence indicates that students’ social integration may actually exert more influence over decisions about persisting than academic integration (Braxton, Sullivan, & Johnson, 1997; Kuh et al., 2007). Furthermore, the greatest impact of orientation efforts may be within the social dimensions of a students’ experience (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986; Mayhew, Stipeck, & Dorow, 2011). Research also suggests that students who are socially (Leafgran, 1989) and emotionally healthy (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Leafgran, 1989) are more likely to succeed in college. Orientation programs, then, ought to be concerned with supporting students as whole persons, and their effectiveness should be examined more broadly.

Barefoot (2000) has issued a call to address this gap in understanding first-year programs, arguing that “we need to go beyond simply measuring student retention. Although retaining students is important to institutions and to students themselves, the primary objective of the collegiate experience is, after all, learning—both in and out of

the classroom” (p. 18). There is some literature that points to the effects of formal transition initiatives apart from retention and GPA. Gentry, Kuhnert, Johnson, and Cox (2006) examined the effects of a weekend long, off-campus orientation program that primarily sought to facilitate students’ social integration. Their findings suggested a range of positive effects of participation:

The results clearly illustrate that those who attended the weekend-long orientation program were more likely than those who did not attend the program to be involved as students in the classroom, be acquainted with their professors away from the classroom, attend extracurricular activities, join groups or committees, and act as leaders on campus. (p. 32)

Research using social identity theory to explore the effects of a Welcome Week program suggested that participation increased students’ sense of belonging and identity with the institution, along with retention and academic performance (Soria, Clark, & Koch, 2013).

Nelson and Vetter (2012) conducted a large study with a subset of 908 first-year students that examined characteristics of students that were most predictive of thriving within the first college year. The results demonstrated that degree goal, campus involvement, and Psychological Sense of Community (PSC) were most strongly related to first-year student thriving within the five factors of the construct. Interestingly, these findings closely align with other research on the potential impacts of orientation programs (Deggs & Associates, 2011; Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986). While this study did not directly examine the effectiveness of a particular program on student

success, the results are informative for initiatives that support students throughout their first weeks on campus.

### **Summary**

As the review of literature in this chapter has endeavored to show, there is strong theoretical and empirical support for an approach to college student success that emphasizes holistic well-being. The concept of thriving provides a rich and sensible model and fills a critical gap in existing frameworks of success in college. Thriving presents a hopeful perspective on the potential of each student, as well as a set of robust dimensions to guide institutional goals and practices. Also, the Thriving Quotient instrument supplies a tool for gathering meaningful data about students' well-being in the present.

Research has not yet examined the effects of individual programs or initiatives on measures of student thriving. Schreiner, McIntosh, and others (2009) have expressed that “further research is needed to explore both the college experiences that affect thriving and the degree to which specific interventions are able to positively impact any of the components of thriving” (p. 19). The significance of the first year in college lends support for an intervention that aims to influence thriving within students' first weeks and months on campus. Thriving's emphasis on academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal dimensions aligns with general purposes and demonstrated outcomes of transition programs. For example, Levitz and Noel (1989) advocate that “efforts to improve freshman persistence, then, must focus on helping them make an academic, personal, and social adjustment to college” (p. 71).

Initiatives that help individuals discern, develop, and judiciously apply strengths and talents have been demonstrated to yield a range of positive outcomes. However, limited research has been conducted on programs utilizing StrengthsFinder and subsequent effects on outcomes related to well-being. Also, Louis' review of existing research as of 2009 included instructive recommendations for the design of future strengths-related studies. She encouraged that:

Controlled intervention studies with experimental or quasi-experimental designs utilizing instruments with demonstrated reliability and validity could be particularly helpful in assessing the impact of strengths-based programs, as some of the existing research is correlational in nature, lacks a control group for comparison, or has been conducted using instruments that have not been well-established. (p. 31)

A study that examines the effects of a strengths-based program on measures of thriving for students in their first year of college is therefore well-positioned to make an important contribution to the literature.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

Following a review of relevant literature in the previous chapter, this chapter outlines the specific methodology utilized in the present study. This includes a description of the research design and questions, an overview of the participants in the study, discussion of the instrument used, details about the intervention itself, a brief explanation of the statistical methods used to analyze the data, and summary of study limitations.

#### **Research Design**

This study utilized a quasi-experimental quantitative framework to examine whether significant differences in thriving measures existed between college students who participated in a strengths-based first-year seminar and students who participated in a non-strengths-based seminar. Like experimental research, quasi-experimental designs can be used to evaluate causal hypotheses. Whereas a true experimental design is characterized by random assignment of participants to groups and control by the researcher over the intervention, quasi-experimental designs are often employed when randomly allocating participants to either treatment or control condition is not feasible (Maxim, 1999). Participants for this study were selected based on enrollment in certain pre-identified sections of a first-year seminar, which precluded the possibility of random sampling and random assignment to groups. A primary benefit of placing participants in

groups at random is the likelihood of distributing potentially confounding variables across groups. Without random assignment, self-selection of participants into groups can become a concern (Maxim, 1999). Though random assignment was not possible, concerns over self-selection bias were mitigated by the nature of the enrollment process for the seminar used as the independent variable in this study. At the time of enrollment, no distinctions were made in course title, description, numbering, or other identifiable details between treatment and control course sections, so students enrolled with no knowledge of the difference between treatment and control sections. Additionally, a pretest was conducted and used as a covariate in the study to establish baseline data for both treatment conditions.

### **Dependent and Independent Variables**

The dependent variables for the study were factors that comprise student thriving, as measured by the Thriving Quotient instrument (Schreiner, 2010a). Thriving itself represents a second-order factor in addition to five first-order scales within the model: 1) Engaged Learning, 2) Academic Determination, 3) Positive Perspective, 4) Social Connectedness, and 5) Diverse Citizenship. The study included a sixth factor, Psychological Sense of Community, that is also measured by the TQ instrument and has been demonstrated to be highly predictive of overall student thriving. The single independent variable had two levels—a treatment group which participated in a strengths-based first-year seminar and a control group which participated in a non-strengths-based seminar.

## **Research Questions**

The following research questions were central in the study:

1) Are there significant differences in measures of thriving between pretest and posttest scores for students who participate in either a strengths-based first-year seminar (treatment condition) or a non-strengths-based first-year seminar (control condition)?

2) Are there significant differences in measures of student thriving between students who participate in a strengths-based first-year seminar and those who participate in a non-strengths-based first-year seminar, after controlling for pre-seminar measures of thriving?

3) If there are significant differences in thriving posttest scores between conditions, which thriving factors exhibit the greatest difference?

## **Participants**

The study was conducted at Baylor University, an independent, selective four-year research institution in the southwestern United States with a primarily full-time student population. The university is considered a “Doctoral University: Higher Research Activity” by the Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education. The student body consists of approximately 16,000 students, of whom 85 percent are undergraduate students. The population in the study was full-time (enrolled in 12 credit hours or more) first-time-in-college students who were enrolled in a general section of University 1000 (U1000), and were at least 18 years of age at the time of the pretest. The U1000 course will be explained further in the Procedures section. The study sample included willing and eligible students enrolled in General U1000 sections taught by

instructors who agreed to participate in the study. Instructors for both control and treatment groups had a minimum of one prior year of experience teaching U1000, and committed to administering an in-person survey during the first and last course meetings. Instructors teaching courses as part of the control group also agreed to adhere to the broad prescribed learning outcomes for General U1000 sections. Instructors for treatment group sections had prior familiarity with the general strengths philosophy and with the StrengthsFinder assessment specifically. These instructors agreed to incorporate strengths-based content provided by the researcher.

U1000 courses enrolled an average of 16 students per section with a maximum of 19. Each section likely had a small number of students who were under 18 years of age and thus unable to participate in the study. The original sample for this study included eight sections of U1000 in the treatment group and seven in the control group. Pretests were not completed for one control section, thus eliminating those participants from the study. Posttests were not returned for another control section, which removed that section as well. The resulting dataset, therefore, consisted of participants from across eight treatment sections and five control sections.

### **Instrumentation**

This study relies on an emerging theoretical framework called *thriving* to examine the effects of a strengths-based first-year seminar on students' well-being. To measure the presence of thriving, researchers have developed a questionnaire called the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, McIntosh, Nelson, & Pothoven, 2009). The instrument is

grounded in theoretical notions from the study of student persistence as well as positive psychology (Schreiner, 2010a; Schreiner, 2012).

The original version of the Thriving Quotient (TQ) was a 198-item instrument based on 13 scales that was used in a 2008 pilot study with 2,474 students at 13 institutions (Schreiner, McIntosh, Nelson, & Pothoven, 2009). After conducting exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses on the resulting data, the researchers significantly reduced the number of scales and items on the instrument. Hierarchical multiple regression and reliability analysis demonstrated that five particular factors and their 25 corresponding items best predicted four important student success outcomes: grade point average, learning gains, intent to graduate, and institutional fit (Schreiner, 2012; Schreiner, McIntosh, Nelson, & Pothoven, 2009). These five factors clustered within 3 thriving themes: academic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal. 1) Engaged Learning and 2) Academic Determination contribute to the theme of academic thriving. Intrapersonal thriving consists of 3) Positive Perspective, a way of viewing the world called *optimistic explanatory style*. The final theme of interpersonal thriving is made up of 4) Diverse Citizenship and 5) Social Connectedness. These five scales represent first-order factors within the model. Additionally, a second-order factor called *thriving* has also been shown to be a good fit for the data (Schreiner, McIntosh, Nelson, & Pothoven, 2009). The 25 items load to these five factors in the following manner: Academic Determination = 6 items, Engaged Learning = 5 items, Positive Perspective = 5 items, Social Connectedness = 3 items, and Diverse Citizenship = 6 items.

An additional scale included in the instrument is Psychological Sense of Community (PSC), which is derived from four items. Although not considered to be a factor within the second-order variable *thriving*, PSC has been demonstrated to be highly predictive of overall thriving. In fact, in their study of first-year student thriving, Nelson and Vetter (2012) found that Psychological Sense of Community predicted overall thriving as well as each of the other five factors. Thus, PSC was included as an additional important dependent variable in this study.

The TQ instrument has been shown to be highly reliable, with estimated internal consistency of Cronbach's alpha = .89 (Schreiner, 2012). Each of the five factors also demonstrates high reliability, with Cronbach's alpha levels estimated at: Engaged Learning = .85, Academic Determination = .83, Positive Perspective = .83, Social Connectedness = .81, and Diverse Citizenship = .80 (Schreiner, McIntosh, Nelson, & Pothoven, 2009). The alpha level for Psychological Sense of Community is also high at .85. Responses to the items on the instrument are made on a 6-point Likert-type scale with choices ranging from *Strongly Disagree* to *Strongly Agree*.

In the present study, the instrument was administered as both a pretest and as a posttest. The pretest included questions about demographic background, such as: gender, first-generation status, household income level, age, high school grades, religious affiliation, race and ethnicity, employment status, and intercollegiate athletics participation. Because first-year students completed the pretest in their first week in college, they were prompted to consider their most recent academic context as they responded to questions on the instrument. The posttest omitted demographic questions

but included additional questions pertaining to students' involvement on campus, satisfaction with the college experience, and overall evaluation of personal thriving. Participants were prompted to complete the posttest with the college context in mind. Both the pretest and posttest versions of the instrument have been developed by the original researcher, Laurie Schreiner, and her team.

### **Procedures**

The intervention program in the study was a first-year seminar course for freshman students called University 1000 (U1000). All new students at Baylor are required to take a New Student Experience (NSE) course, and the institution offers a variety of options that satisfy this requirement. Students entering certain academic areas, such as business or psychology, are required to take a for-credit course offered by their school or college that serves as a foundation for further study within their chosen field. Other courses are reserved for students participating in programs such as certain Living-Learning Programs, and a number of courses are also available in special interest areas. Recent years have seen a dramatic growth in the number and variety of for-credit first-year course offerings. Many first-year students, however, continue to enroll in U1000, a seminar that seeks to support students through much of their first semester as they transition into the university. The course has six meetings throughout the first ten weeks of students' first semester at the university, and credit is connected to students' required Chapel credit. To satisfy their university Chapel credit, students must attend a minimum percentage of the total number of Chapel sessions offered for the semester. Students enrolled in U1000 essentially have an increase of six possible Chapel sessions, to reflect

the six seminar meetings. There is no curricular or content connection between U1000 and Chapel. While some U1000 sections are linked to certain academic or housing areas, many are general sections with open enrollment. Section sizes are typically no more than twenty students, and general U1000 sections are taught by faculty and staff from across the university.

U1000 courses primarily aim to aid students in forming connections with other new students and with a faculty or staff member who desires to support students in their transition to the university. Established learning objectives for these courses include:

- Connecting with the university
- Developing autonomy
- Succeeding academically
- Engaging in spiritual formation
- Developing personal and professional goals
- Understanding the university's mission and learning outcomes

Recommended curriculum and additional resources are provided to instructors in support of these broad objectives. The curriculum does afford instructors considerable latitude by offering a wide array of readings, discussion questions, activities and other materials.

The present study utilized a quasi-experimental design with several sections serving as a control group and others serving as a treatment group. Control group sections followed the traditional U1000 curriculum, and instructors were granted the standard degree of flexibility provided by the university in designing their course sessions within the prescribed learning outcomes. In this way, the study used the existing

U1000 structure and experience as an accurate comparison for the intervention in the study. Treatment group sections followed a separate curriculum designed by the researcher that introduced students to their top five talent themes as measured by the StrengthsFinder tool. The curriculum emphasized talent identification along with strengths development approaches that have been shown to be critical in strengths-based initiatives (Louis, 2008). The primary learning outcomes of the seminar were the same for treatment sections as for control, yet the course content was infused with a strengths-based approach in addressing the topics.

All instructors teaching a section of U1000 are highly encouraged to attend a 2.5-hour training session prior to the beginning of fall semester classes. The training session is considered mandatory for first-time instructors and optional but recommended in subsequent years. The session is facilitated by university personnel who coordinate New Student Experience (NSE) courses and are responsible for the development of traditional U1000 and BU1000 curriculum and content. Throughout the semester, a staff coordinator for NSE courses communicates with all instructors 2-4 times per month via email. Course planning materials—including readings, activities, discussion questions, and more—are accessible at any time through an intranet page.

All instructors in the study—treatment and control—were encouraged to attend the initial training session. Instructors teaching control group sections then prepared for and managed their course sections as other General U1000 instructors would. In addition to the recommended training session, treatment group instructors were invited to a one-hour meeting to learn about the structure of the strengths-based curriculum used in the

study. In order to match the preparatory opportunities of control and treatment instructors as closely as possible, this brief meeting was primarily intended to share an overview of the desired course outcomes and provide information about how course resources would be made available. The researcher corresponded with these instructors throughout the semester via email. Course materials were made available through a university-provided online document storage and sharing platform called Box.

The final data set included eight seminar sections within the treatment group and five sections within the control group. Questionnaires were dropped from the study if participants did not provide consent or were under the age of 18 at the time of the pretest, if student identification numbers could not be matched between pre- and posttests, or if the number of missing items precluded analysis. Following the removal of participants for these reasons, a total of 136 participants remained in the study.

Approval for the study was granted by the university's Institutional Review Board prior to the collection of data. Students in the sample completed a paper pretest version of the Thriving Quotient on the first day of the U1000 course, which occurred during the first week of classes in the fall semester. Surveys were administered in-person to maximize participation in the study. Instructors for control and treatment groups were provided a script to use in introducing the study to their students. Students received an informed consent form along with the survey instrument.

A paper posttest version of the instrument was administered on the last day of the U1000 course, which—for most sections—occurred during the tenth week of the fall

semester. An informed consent form was again provided with the instrument. All eligible students in the sample were encouraged to complete this survey.

Students were asked to provide their university-issued student ID number on both pretest and posttest in order to match the two surveys with the correct student. Survey responses were entered manually onto the researcher's encrypted and password-protected university-provided computer. Once the data was entered, student ID numbers were replaced with anonymous codes to protect participants' anonymity. Hard copies of completed surveys were stored in a locked filing drawer in the university office of the researcher. The office remained locked when not in use and was within a larger office suite that was locked when not in use. To the extent allowed by law, data were not shared by anyone not directly associated with the research project. Any reporting or other usage of the data or results will be in aggregate form with no individually identifiable information.

Students were not offered any incentive for participating in the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The research questions will be addressed through the following analyses:

1) Are there significant differences in measures of thriving between pretest and posttest scores for students who participate in either a strengths-based first-year seminar (treatment condition) or a non-strengths-based first-year seminar (control condition)?

This question was addressed using paired-samples *t*-tests to compare pretest and posttest scores within each treatment condition. The single dependent variable was a composite score made up of the sum total for the items corresponding to the six thriving

factors in the study: Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, Diverse Citizenship, and Psychological Sense of Community.

2) Are there significant differences in measures of student thriving between students who participate in a strengths-based first-year seminar and those who participate in a non-strengths-based first-year seminar, after controlling for pre-seminar measures of thriving?

A multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was conducted to examine whether significant differences existed between treatment and control groups on posttest measures of thriving. Dependent variables for this analysis included posttest mean scores for the six related thriving variables, and pretest scores on these same measures were used as covariates. The independent variable was student participation in either the treatment or control group.

3) Are specific factors of student thriving affected to greater degrees as a result of student participation in a strengths-based first-year seminar?

If appropriate based on results of the MANCOVA for Question 2, univariate ANCOVAs were conducted as follow-up tests to examine which specific factors of thriving differed between treatment and control groups.

Analyses was conducted using IBM SPSS software Version 23.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations are present in the study. First, the intervention itself is limited in terms of contact time with students. The seminar in the study has six 50-minute regularly-scheduled meetings throughout the first ten weeks of the semester, with class

sessions typically occurring biweekly. As there is not stand-alone academic credit for the course, students' out-of-class engagement with course content and material is minimal. Potential differences between treatment and control groups may therefore be difficult to detect with this limited amount of contact hours. However, a brief intervention is not unusual with strengths-based approaches. As one example, Lehnert (2009) saw significant differences in leadership practice scores for students who completed six online strengths-based leadership modules as compared to students who completed non-strengths-based modules.

Second, a true experimental design with random assignment of students to groups was not possible. However, self-selection bias was not overly concerning for this study due to the nature of the enrollment process. When enrolling in sections of General U1000, students had no knowledge of whether specific sections were to be designated as treatment or control. The only unique piece of information at the time of enrollment for each section was the specific class meeting time.

Relatedly, instructors were not assigned to groups at random. Instead, treatment group instructors were specifically identified based on pre-existing familiarity with the strengths approach. This was primarily to maintain a consistent amount of training time between control group and treatment group instructors. The researcher corresponded via email with treatment group instructors in order to protect against differing amounts of training.

Additionally, the number of course sections—and thus the number of participants—was smaller than originally desired based in part on the university's

decision to offer fewer sections of General U1000. The sample size for the study is relatively small, though sufficient for the types of analyses used.

Lastly, this study was conducted at a single institution. The university at which the research was conducted is a private, faith-based institution with primarily traditional-aged students enrolled full-time. All first-year students—with few exceptions—are required to live on-campus. Results of the study may be generalizable to similar student populations in similar institutional settings, but may not be applicable in other contexts.

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology of the present study, which assessed differences between treatment and control conditions of first-year seminars on measures of student thriving. The following chapter presents results of the data analyses conducted as outlined.

## **CHAPTER IV**

### **RESULTS**

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to present results of the statistical analyses conducted to address the primary research questions. This study utilized a quasi-experimental design with treatment and control groups to assess whether students in a strengths-based first-year seminar demonstrated higher levels of thriving than students in a non-strengths-based seminar. The independent variable was a first-year seminar intervention in which participants in the treatment group were exposed to a strengths-based curriculum, while participants in the control group were exposed to the traditional seminar curriculum without an emphasis on strengths. Dependent variables in the study included measures of student thriving across six factors: 1) Engaged Learning, 2) Academic Determination, 3) Positive Perspective, 4) Social Connectedness, 5) Diverse Citizenship, and 6) Psychological Sense of Community. “Thriving” represents a second-order variable comprised by the first five factors; Psychological Sense of Community is included as a dependent variable in this study as it is consistently highly predictive of overall thriving.

#### **Research Questions**

The following questions were addressed by this study:

1) Are there significant differences in measures of thriving before and after students participate in a strengths-based first-year seminar (treatment condition) or a non-strengths-based first-year seminar (control condition)?

2) Are there significant differences in measures of student thriving between students who participate in a strengths-based first-year seminar and those who participate in a non-strengths-based first-year seminar, after controlling for pre-seminar measures of thriving?

3) Are specific factors of student thriving affected to greater degrees as a result of student participation in a strengths-based first-year seminar?

To explore these questions, the following hypotheses were formed:

Hypothesis 1: Participants in both the treatment condition (strengths-based curriculum) and control condition (non-strengths-based curriculum) will demonstrate increases in measures of thriving from pretest scores to posttest scores.

Hypothesis 2: Participants in the strengths-based first-year seminar sections will demonstrate higher levels of thriving than participants in non-strengths-based sections, after controlling for pretest measures.

Hypothesis 3: Factors related to interpersonal and intrapersonal thriving will show the greatest difference.

Statistical analyses were conducted to explore each of these questions. Paired-samples *t*-tests were used to compare pretest and posttest scores within treatment and control groups. Multivariate Analysis of Covariance (MANCOVA) was used to examine

posttest scores between treatment and control groups, followed by Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) where appropriate.

### **Pre-Analysis Data Screening**

Both the pretest and posttest were conducted in-class using paper-and-pencil instruments. Survey responses were then entered manually into Microsoft Excel by the researcher before being imported into Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) Version 23. Data was initially screened to remove participants who were under the age of 18, did not complete both the pretest and posttest, or for whom pretest and posttest could not be matched by student ID number. The resulting dataset included 136 total participants across all treatment and control sections.

An analysis of missing values within this dataset revealed minimal missing data, no greater than 1% for any single variable in the study. A common and generally accepted approach for dealing with less than 5% of data missing is listwise deletion, in which cases with any missing values for included variables are entirely removed from analyses (Mertler & Vannatta, 2013). However, the result of this approach is a diminished sample size and potential bias of parameter estimates (Cox, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2014; Little & Rubin, 1989). Alternatively, methods for imputing missing values preserve sample size and are increasingly preferred over listwise deletion and other simplistic techniques such as mean substitution. A method called Expectation-Maximization (EM) was utilized in this study as it has been demonstrated to yield more satisfactory results than traditional approaches (Cox, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2014), yet is also considered both straightforward and reasonable when compared to

other imputation techniques (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2001; Cox, McIntosh, Reason, & Terenzini, 2014). This technique uses an iterative approach to maximize the likelihood that substituted data resemble that of the population in the analysis. Missing data were also examined within each case, revealing two cases which had more than one missing item within a single scale. These cases were subsequently removed from further analysis, yielding a dataset of 134 participants.

Dependent variables and covariates were screened for outliers and normality within both treatment and control conditions. Examinations for univariate outliers were conducted using box plots and standardized z-scores; univariate scores beyond  $|3.29|$  standard deviations from the mean were identified as outliers (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2014). Tests for outliers were conducted first for individual variables used in the MANCOVA, as sum scores of these same variables were used as a composite dependent variable in the *t*-tests analyses. Two cases within the treatment group were identified as outliers and removed from further analysis. For *t*-tests analyses, a new variable was created for both treatment and control conditions to represent the difference between posttest and pretest scores on the composite dependent variable. No outliers were detected within the new difference variable. Variables used in the MANCOVA were also examined for multivariate outliers by comparing Mahalanobis distance values to the chi-square critical value for the treatment group ( $\chi^2 = 22.458, df = 6, p < .001$ ) and the control group ( $\chi^2 = 22.458, df = 6, p < .001$ ). No multivariate outliers were identified in either group.

The final dataset for the analyses included 132 students, with 87 in the treatment group and 45 in the control group. Demographics information for the sample is shown in Table 1.

For within-group tests conducted using paired-samples *t*-tests, visual inspection of normal Q-Q plots suggested that the difference variable was normally distributed for each group. A non-significant Shapiro-Wilk result for both the treatment group ( $p = .088$ ) and the control group ( $p = .894$ ) further affirmed this assessment.

Tests for normality within individual dependent variables for the MANCOVA were conducted primarily by examination of skewness and kurtosis values within each treatment condition. Multivariate analyses on data with more than 20 cases in the smallest cell tend to be robust to violations of normality, as long as violations are due to skewness and not to the presence of outliers (Merttler & Vannatta, 2013). In his review of prior studies, Stevens (2002) found that deviations from multivariate normality had little effect on the likelihood of Type I error, and that even “considerably skewed distributions” (p. 263) did not significantly contribute to a distortion of power. However, the presence of platykurtosis—negative kurtosis values resulting in a flattened distribution—can considerably weaken power. Merttler and Vannatta (2013) recommend that skewness and kurtosis levels for each variable fall within a range of -1 to +1 to be considered approximately normal. Most variables in this study exhibited skewness and kurtosis values within this range. No values were below -1, indicating that platykurtosis was not a concern for the data. Due to the robustness of multivariate analyses and

sufficient sample size, departures from normality were not determined to pose a threat to the study.

Table 1

*Demographic Characteristics of Participants (N = 132)*

Characteristic	Treatment ( <i>n</i> = 87)		Control ( <i>n</i> = 45)	
	n	%	n	%
Gender				
Female	59	67.8	31	68.9
Male	28	32.2	14	31.1
First-generation	16	18.4	8	17.8
Race/Ethnicity				
Caucasian/White	61	70.1	20	44.4
Latino/Hispanic	10	11.5	9	20.0
African-American/Black	3	3.4	6	13.3
Asian-American/Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	8	9.2	5	11.1
American Indian/Alaskan Native	1	1.1	1	2.2
Multi	1	1.1	3	6.7
Other	1	1.1	1	2.2
Not indicated	3	3.4		

A preliminary MANCOVA was conducted to examine homogeneity of variances-covariances (homoscedasticity) and homogeneity of regression slopes. Homogeneity of variance for univariate variables was confirmed by non-significant

Levene's test results. Box's M test for equality of variance-covariance matrices assesses the assumption of similarity of the variability of scores across all continuous variables. Box's test was not significant [ $F(21, 30335) = 1.175, p = .261$ ], suggesting that equal variances could be assumed across multivariate variables. Because of this finding, Wilk's Lambda was used as the multivariate statistic for the test of homogeneity of regression slopes. A non-significant result [Wilk's  $\Lambda = .896, F(12, 234) = 1.104, p = .358$ ] indicated that the interaction between the independent variable and the covariates did not pose a problem for the analyses (Mertler & Vannatta, 2013).

Following data screening, analyses were conducted to address the research questions in the study.

### **Within-Group Results**

The first question analyzed was whether either condition demonstrated a statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest scores on a combined measure of thriving. This question was addressed using paired-samples *t*-tests within each condition. The dependent variable was a composite score of the 25 items that load to the five factors within the thriving construct, along with the four items representing the Psychological Sense of Community scale. There was not a statistically significant difference in the thriving composite measure between posttest ( $M = 133.04, SD = 14.86$ ) and pretest ( $M = 131.23, SD = 15.32$ ) scores for the treatment group;  $t(86) = 1.341, p = .183, d = 0.144$ . The 95% confidence interval for the mean difference between posttest and pretest scores for the treatment group was -0.87 to 4.45. The difference between posttest ( $M = 132.26, SD = 17.9$ ) and pretest ( $M = 132.51, SD = 15.19$ ) scores for the

control group was also non-significant;  $t(44) = -0.129$ ,  $p = .898$ ,  $d = |.019|$  with a 95% confidence interval of -4.24 to 3.73. Results of the  $t$ -tests suggest that the first null hypothesis cannot be rejected. Although the treatment group showed a slight increase from pretest to posttest scores and the control group a slight decrease, neither difference was statistically significant.

### **Between-Group Results**

MANCOVA was utilized to test whether statistically significant differences existed between treatment and control groups on posttest measures of thriving, after controlling for pretest scores of the same measures of thriving. The thriving construct consists of multiple related factors, which served as the dependent variables in this analysis. These included the five factors that comprise the second-order *thriving* variable—Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, and Diverse Citizenship—as well as a sixth factor—Psychological Sense of Community—that is highly predictive of student thriving. Participants' scores on these variables at the posttest constituted the dependent variables. MANCOVA allows the inclusion of more than one dependent variable by creating a new dependent variable that is a linear combination of the original variables. The use of MANCOVA also affords the ability to remove the effects of covariates (Mertler & Vannatta, 2013). In this way, “the adjusted linear combination of DVs is the combination that would be obtained if all participants had the same scores on the covariates” (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2014, p. 306). This characteristic of MANCOVA was particularly valuable in this study since true random assignment to groups was not possible. Additionally, including multiple

covariates further reduces the overall error variance beyond that for which a single covariate could account. This also reduces the likelihood of a Type I error. (Merttler & Vannatta, 2013). The covariates in this study were pretest scores of the same six factors used as dependent variables. An alpha of .05 was used for all multivariate analyses.

MANCOVA requires that dependent variables are reasonably related to one another; Mayers (2013) recommends correlations between  $|.3|$  and  $|.9|$  as sufficient. Literature on thriving suggests that the dependent variables used in this study are indeed correlated. Pearson correlations were conducted on the six variables, and results indicated significant relationship amongst the variables (Table 2).

Table 2

*Bivariate Correlations of Dependent Variables*

Variable (Posttest scores)	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Engaged Learning	---	.595*	.102	.013	.375*	.352*
2. Academic Determination	.595*	---	.314*	.202	.372*	.436*
3. Positive Perspective	.102	.314*	---	.432*	.383*	.359*
4. Social Connectedness	.013	.202	.432*	---	.220	.365*
5. Diverse Citizenship	.375*	.372*	.383*	.220	---	.490*
6. Psychological Sense of Community	.352*	.436*	.359*	.365*	.490*	---

\* $p < .01$ .

A one-way MANCOVA was used to examine the effect of the independent variable, a strengths-based first-year seminar, on student thriving during participants'

first semester in college. Results of the MANCOVA (Table 3) indicated that there was not a statistically significant difference in posttest scores on the new combined

Table 3

*Multivariate Analysis of Covariance of Posttest Thriving Measures as a Function of Treatment Condition*

Source	Multivariate		Univariate					
	<i>F</i> (6, 119)	$\eta^2$	EL		AD		PP	
			<i>F</i> (1, 124)	$\eta^2$	<i>F</i> (1, 124)	$\eta^2$	<i>F</i> (1, 124)	$\eta^2$
Condition	.552	.027	.730	.006	.929	.007	.105	.001
Engaged Learning (EL) (covariate)	7.071***	.263	25.932***	.173	1.961	.016	2.431	.019
Academic Determination (AD) (covariate)	9.433***	.322	2.467	.020	40.016***	.244	1.933	.015
Positive Perspective (PP) (covariate)	27.294***	.579	2.538	.020	.081	.001	134.254***	.520
Social Connectedness (SC) (covariate)	12.338***	.384	1.185	.009	.718	.006	.639	.005
Diverse Citizenship (DC) (covariate)	11.507***	.367	.312	.003	.026	.000	.454	.004
Psychological Sense of Community (PSC) (covariate)	11.905***	.375	2.438	.019	.171	.001	.591	.005

Note. Multivariate *F* ratios were generated from the Wilk's Lambda statistic.

\**p* < .05. \*\**p* < .01. \*\*\**p* < .001.

Table 3 Continued

*Multivariate Analysis of Covariance of Posttest Thriving Measures as a Function of Treatment Condition*

Source	Multivariate		Univariate					
	<i>F</i> (6, 119)	$\eta^2$	SC		DC		PSC	
			<i>F</i> (1, 124)	$\eta^2$	<i>F</i> (1, 124)	$\eta^2$	<i>F</i> (1, 124)	$\eta^2$
Condition	.552	.027	.406	.003	.162	.001	1.671	.013
Engaged Learning (EL) (covariate)	7.071***	.263	6.767*	.052	.450	.005	2.078	.152
Academic Determination (AD) (covariate)	9.433***	.322	5.279*	.041	1.054	.008	.955	.008
Positive Perspective (PP) (covariate)	27.294***	.579	.092	.001	2.298	.018	.922	.007
Social Connectedness (SC) (covariate)	12.338***	.384	64.012***	.340	.390	.003	.123	.001
Diverse Citizenship (DC) (covariate)	11.507***	.367	.908	.007	44.513***	.264	1.350	.011
Psychological Sense of Community (PSC) (covariate)	11.905***	.375	.459	.004	7.881**	.060	51.559***	.294

Note. Multivariate *F* ratios were generated from the Wilk's Lambda statistic.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

dependent variable between the treatment group and the control group [Wilk's  $\Lambda = .973$ ,  $F(6, 119) = .552$ ,  $p = .768$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .027$ ]. Therefore, the second null hypothesis of no difference between groups must be retained. As expected, the covariates of pretest scores for each of the variables significantly influenced the combined dependent

variable. Table 4 shows pretest mean scores for both groups. Although differences were not statistically significant, adjusted posttest mean scores for the treatment group were higher than the control group for all but one variable (Table 5).

Table 4

*Pretest Mean Scores and Standard Deviations as a Function of Treatment Condition*

Source (Covariates)	Treatment		Control	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Engaged learning (EL)	4.078	.875	4.383	.799
Academic determination (AD)	4.693	.640	4.837	.621
Positive perspective (PP)	3.977	.959	4.059	.905
Social connectedness (SC)	4.201	1.115	3.974	1.067
Diverse citizenship (DC)	4.776	.698	4.852	.592
Psychological sense of community (PSC)	5.248	.711	5.044	.966

Investigation of univariate ANCOVAs to address research question 3 was not appropriate due to a non-significant result for the MANCOVA (Mertler & Vannatta, 2013).

Table 5

*Adjusted Posttest Mean Scores and Standard Errors as a Function of Treatment Condition*

Source	Treatment		Control	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Engaged Learning (EL)	4.421	.075	4.310	.105
Academic Determination (AD)	4.726	.063	4.621	.088
Positive Perspective (PP)	4.106	.065	4.069	.091
Social Connectedness (SC)	4.161	.084	4.254	.117
Diverse Citizenship (DC)	4.837	.055	4.798	.078
Psychological Sense of Community (PSC)	5.233	.070	5.074	.099

**Summary**

This chapter presented results of data analyses that were performed to address the study's research questions. These results indicated that there did not exist a significant difference between pretest and posttest thriving scores for either the treatment condition—which followed a strengths-based curriculum—or the control condition—which followed a non-strengths-based curriculum. Additionally, there was not a significant difference in posttest scores between the two groups. For this reason, analyses to further explore possible differences were not undertaken.

## CHAPTER V

### SUMMARY

#### **Introduction**

Student success is the central aim of higher education, and yet the field predominantly relies on models and measures that capture limited information about students' actual experiences. An emerging concept called thriving offers a more holistic articulation of student success with an emphasis on well-being across multiple dimensions. The present study employs the thriving framework to evaluate the effects of a specific intervention during the first semester of college. This chapter provides a summary and discussion of the findings presented in the previous chapter. Implications for practice and for future research are also discussed.

#### **Purpose and Design**

The present study brings together research on first-year students, strengths-based initiatives, and college student thriving; it is the first known study to explore the effects of a specific intervention on measures of thriving. The purpose of this research was to examine the effects of a strengths-based first-year seminar on thriving, during students' first semester in college. The 132 participants in the study were enrolled in either a control group ( $n=45$ ) seminar section that followed the usual curriculum for the seminar, or in a treatment group ( $n=87$ ) section that followed a strengths-based curriculum. The study utilized a quasi-experimental design in which all participants from both treatment conditions completed pretest surveys on the first day of the seminar and posttest surveys

at the end of the seminar. Research was conducted at a private research university in the southwestern region of the United States.

The intervention and independent variable in the study was a seminar that met six times through the first ten weeks of the Fall 2014 academic semester and did not carry academic credit. The dependent variables were factors of student thriving, as measured by the Thriving Quotient (Schreiner, McIntosh, Nelson, & Pothoven, 2009). Thriving is comprised of five factors within three themes. Academic thriving includes: 1) Engaged Learning, and 2) Academic Determination; intrapersonal thriving is represented by: 3) Positive Perspective; and interpersonal thriving consists of: 4) Social Connectedness, and 5) Diverse Citizenship. A sixth related factor called Psychological Sense of Community was included in the study because of its high correlation with the thriving construct and its relevance to first-year students in transition (Nelson & Vetter, 2012). The utilization of the thriving construct in this study provides data on holistic outcome measures that extend beyond what can be revealed by retention and academic performance alone.

The study was guided by the following research questions:

1) Are there significant differences in measures of thriving before and after students participate in a strengths-based first-year seminar (treatment condition) or a non-strengths-based first-year seminar (control condition)?

2) Are there significant differences in measures of student thriving between students who participate in a strengths-based first-year seminar and those who

participate in a non-strengths-based first-year seminar, after controlling for pre-seminar measures of thriving?

3) Are specific factors of student thriving affected to greater degrees as a result of student participation in a strengths-based first-year seminar?

## **Discussion of Findings**

### **Question 1**

Results of the analyses for the first research question indicated that there was not a statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest scores for either the treatment or control group. For this reason, the null hypothesis could not be rejected. The dependent variable for the analyses consisted of a sum score of several factors that comprise a model of student well-being called thriving. This composite score included factors of Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, Diverse Citizenship, and Psychological Sense of Community. Differences between each group's posttest and pretest scores were examined using paired-samples *t*-tests. Participants in both the treatment group and the control group were enrolled in sections of a first-year seminar in their first semester in college. Students in the control group experienced the traditional curriculum for this particular seminar, while students in the treatment group were exposed to a strengths-based curriculum. A primary purpose for this initial research question and subsequent analyses was to examine whether either approach contributed to a significant change in students' self-reported thriving scores following the intervention. The findings reveal that neither intervention led to such a change.

Based on extensive literature demonstrating an array of positive outcomes associated with first-year seminars, the first hypothesis for this study was that both the seminar interventions—treatment and control—would lead to significant differences in thriving measures between pretest and posttests scores. Additionally, the conceptual connections between the thriving framework and the aspirations of first-year transition programs indicate that participation in first-year seminars could indeed contribute to increased student thriving. The findings are therefore somewhat surprising.

First-year seminars have been the subject of considerable research, the results of which tend to be highly favorable and suggest that seminars contribute to an array of positive outcomes (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). In the aggregate, these results include increased retention rates, higher GPAs, higher number of credit hours attempted and completed, increased graduation rates, more positive student attitudes and (Hunter & Linder, 2005). Keup and Barefoot (2005) conducted a longitudinal study using data from the 2000 Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP) and the 2001 Your First College Year (YFCY). This study represented 3,680 students from 50 institutions across the country. As compared to peers who did not participate in first-year seminars, seminar participants in their study were more engaged in the campus community; reported greater likelihood of interacting with faculty, speaking up in class, collaborating with peers on academic work, and attending class; and demonstrated a greater propensity toward developing close friendships with fellow students. In addition, the researchers report that:

Most important, however, is that taking a first-year seminar is not only associated with students' behaviors but with perceptions and feelings about the college experience. Course participants are more likely to report feeling integrated into the campus community and more successful at various aspects of campus life. (Keup & Barefoot, 2005, p. 36)

First-year seminars have even been shown to positively affect students' need for cognition, which is a measure of orientation to life-long learning (Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013).

Though evidence supports a broad range of positive effects from first-year seminar participation, the most common outcomes examined are retention and academic performance (Cuseo, 2010; Padgett, Keup, & Pascarella, 2013). For example, Sidle and McReynolds (1999) conducted a study with an experimental group of seminar participants compared with a matched control group of non-participants. Participants demonstrated higher first- to second-year retention rates, higher cumulative grade point averages, and higher ratios of earned to attempted credit hours in their first year. Other studies—including comprehensive reviews by Pascarella and Terenzini (1991, 2005)—have found similarly favorable effects on retention from the first year to the second (Fidler, 1991; Williford, Chapman, and Kahrig, 2001; Miller, Janz, & Chen, 2007) and on first-year student grade point averages (Jamelske, 2009).

The overwhelmingly favorable findings of the impacts of first-year seminars are countered by a comparatively small number of studies demonstrating little or no significant effects. For instance, Hendel (2006-2007) found that seminar participants in

his study had higher scores than non-participants on 15 of 92 survey items, yet did not differ in first- to second-year retention or in overall satisfaction.

The existing body of research is strongly supportive of seminars for first-year seminars. Nevertheless, some caution may be in order when interpreting these collective results. As with a number of other researchers, Miller and Lesik (2014) found that participants in their study had higher persistence and graduation rates than non-participants. They also accounted for entry-level academic preparation (ELAP)—a composite of ACT score, high school class rank, and number of college preparatory units—gender, and minority status. In discussing their findings, Miller and Lesik (2014) state:

Looking only at descriptive results of this study, it is correct to say that participants tend to be more successful than non-participants in their persistence and degree attainment.... What is not so clear is whether participation or non-participation adds in a meaningful way to the amount of variability in persistence accounted for by ELAP and other demographic factors. (p. 386)

They further suggest the possibility that the root cause or causes of participants' greater success may be an unknown confounding variable or combination of variables, and "that simple descriptive measures may not necessarily tell the whole story, as is the case with this study" (p. 388). In other words, even in the face of seemingly positive findings, the researchers acknowledge that the full picture is complex and requires nuanced exploration.

Past research on first-year seminars tends to support the efficacy of such initiatives, although studies most commonly have examined the effects of these programs on student grade point average and retention. In light of the favorable results found in prior research, the findings of this study are rather surprising. At the same time, this study represents a departure from many past studies by examining student well-being—rather than grades or retention—as the outcome of interest. Prior to this study, research had not yet examined the effects of a specific intervention on student thriving. Existing literature on thriving has primarily sought to lay the groundwork for the construct rather than conduct experimental designs with thriving as a dependent variable. Thus, there is limited literature on the kinds of initiatives that are likely to enhance student thriving.

A number of conceivable contributing factors for the non-significant difference between the groups' pretest and posttest scores will be considered. The first is the likelihood that the nature of the seminar used as the intervention in the study was simply not powerful enough to yield a statistically significant change in students during the tumultuous first semester in college. The seminar did not carry academic credit, so instructors had very limited means to expect students to engage in any work outside of class. After the first two weeks, seminar sessions met biweekly through the first ten weeks of the semester, for a total of six 50-minute class meetings. As Milligan (2007) concluded in her study on a strengths-based intervention that spanned eight weeks, "this may not have been sufficient time to provide evidence of significant cognitive, emotional, and/or behavioral changes" (p. 82). In the midst of considerable life changes

and new experiences during the first weeks of college, a fairly brief intervention like the seminar in this study may not offer high enough impact to yield a discernible change in thriving. This study's findings indicate that a more robust intervention is necessary to effect a measurable change in complex outcomes such as those within the thriving construct.

An additional possibility is that students' initial ratings of their thriving at the time of the pretest were somewhat inflated. Pretests were administered during students' first week in college, and it is plausible that many students are at that point in a bit of a honeymoon stage of their college experience. The newfound freedom, possibilities, and excitement of college may induce feelings of optimism that are likely to subside as students encounter and navigate a multitude of challenges.

At the same time, research has consistently demonstrated the role that students' entering characteristics play in their overall college experience (Astin & Oseguera, 2005; Kuh et al., 2005). And while one of the more promising qualities of the thriving construct is the malleability of each of its components (Schreiner, 2012), this study's findings affirm the significant weight of the inputs students bring with them. Students in both treatment and control groups showed no statistically significant difference between posttest scores and pretest scores. In other words, who they were at week 10 was highly consistent with who they were at week 1.

Another consideration regarding this study's first finding is the prospect that the students in this study could as a whole demonstrate higher levels of thriving than students at other institutions. The campus in the study tends to attract academically high-

achieving students, and virtually all new first-year students are required to live on campus. At a selective, residential campus such as this, the possibility exists that a high percentage of students enter the university with strong confidence in their abilities and in their choice of and sense of fit with the institution. These factors could conceivably lead to high scores on the Thriving Quotient, resulting in reduced differences between posttest and pretest measures. As this study included data from a single campus, comparisons cannot be made with student populations at other institutions.

## **Question 2**

Results of the analyses for the second research question suggest that a statistically significant difference did not exist between treatment and control groups on posttest measures of student thriving [Wilk's  $\Lambda = .973$ ,  $F(6, 119) = .552$ ,  $p = .768$ , partial  $\eta^2 = .027$ ]. The null hypothesis could therefore not be rejected. The multivariate analyses were conducted using six correlated measures of thriving as the dependent variables: Engaged Learning, Academic Determination, Positive Perspective, Social Connectedness, Diverse Citizenship, and Psychological Sense of Community. MANCOVA (Multivariate Analysis of Covariance) was utilized to compare posttest measures of these factors between the two treatment conditions, after controlling for pretest measures on these same scales. The primary purpose of this research question was to examine whether a strengths-based approach would contribute to higher thriving posttest scores than a non-strengths-based approach. The findings indicate that the treatment and control groups did not differ in a statistically significant manner.

Although research has not yet utilized the thriving framework to examine the effects of strengths-based initiatives, findings from previous studies on strengths-related efforts suggest that scholarly work in this area is warranted. Louis and Schreiner (2012) have also asserted the appropriateness of strengths-focused programs as possible pathways to enhanced student thriving. The present study sought to contribute to early knowledge on the linkage between strengths-based initiatives and student thriving. It was hypothesized that participants in the study's treatment group would exhibit higher levels of thriving after completion of a strengths-based first-year seminar than students who completed a similar seminar that did not include an emphasis on strengths. The results did not support this hypothesis.

Past research on strengths-based initiatives has yielded an array of positive findings. In a study of first-year college students, Williamson (2002) found that a treatment group of 32 students who were exposed to content based on StrengthsFinder had significantly higher first-semester grade point averages, semester credit hours earned, and higher first- to second-year retention rates than a control group of 40 of their peers. Students in the treatment group participated in two strengths-based class sessions as well as an individual meeting with the researcher to discuss their StrengthsFinder assessment results. Participants in the control group completed the StrengthsFinder assessment without any additional content. Although Williamson's study was similar to the present study in that the intervention itself was relatively brief, two important distinctions should be noted. First, that study found significant differences between treatment and control groups in first semester GPA and number of credits earned.

Second, participants in the treatment group in Williamson's study engaged in individual conversations about personal strengths with a trained consultant.

Other studies have demonstrated greater sense of direction in life, self-confidence, and desire to learn about and cultivate the talents of others (Crabtree, 2002); increased academic engagement when approaching coursework in light of personal strengths, as well as greater academic motivation and relationship-building skills (Estévez, 2005); higher levels of student engagement, greater satisfaction with the institution, and higher course scores for students in a strengths-based version of a course as compared to students in a non-strengths-based version of the same course (Cantwell, 2005).

Several studies on strengths-based initiatives in the first college year have been conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota. Their research has found that awareness of personal strengths is associated with higher first- to second-year retention (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015), as well as with academic self-efficacy and engagement, even after controlling for other factors (Soria & Stubblefield, 2014). They have also shown strong correlations between opportunities for conversations with others regarding strengths and increased likelihood of retention from the first to the second year (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015). Stebleton, Soria, and Albecker (2012) found that a single group of students who were exposed to the StrengthsQuest curriculum demonstrated increased confidence in their abilities to identify personal strengths and abilities, assess their personal values related to choices of major and career, leverage their strengths to learn

more effectively, and use their strengths to determine realistic expectations about the future.

Other studies on strengths-focused initiatives with college students have not been found as effective. McPherson (2007) administered an original survey to sophomore students that examined perceptions of the effectiveness of four retention programs on various scales of integration. Those programs included the single institution's new student orientation, first-year seminars, academic advising, and StrengthsQuest. Results suggested that all programs except StrengthsQuest contributed to moderate to significant effects on the five areas of integration and to students' overall satisfaction with the university. Jerilee Hinson Milligan (2007) conducted an experimental study with 60 students using pre- and posttests to investigate the effects of a strengths-based study skills and strategies program for freshman- and sophomore-level students on academic probation. The treatment group consisted of thirty students who participated in the intervention; the control group included matched students who did not participate in any intervention. Dependent variables in the study included knowledge and usage of study skills and learning strategies, goal-orientation determination, optimism, and grade point average. No significant differences were found between treatment and control groups for any of the outcome variables examined.

As with the findings from the first research question in this study, one strong possibility for the non-significant results of the second question is that the intervention itself—for both the treatment and control groups—was neither powerful enough nor long enough to effect discernible change in student thriving. Additionally, the institution's

stated outcomes for the seminar used as the intervention in the study are broad and perhaps ambitious given the time constraints and inability to engage students in out-of-class work. Given these broad outcomes, the seminar content for both versions was also rather general. For example, students in treatment sections were exposed to the strengths philosophy, explored their own talent themes in more depth, and learned about the talents of others. Although instructors encouraged students to consider how their talents connected to and might be leveraged in various aspects of their lives, the curriculum itself did not focus explicitly on how those talents could be applied in specific contexts such as learning strategies or fostering healthy relationships. Without direct leading, students may have been ill-equipped to apply knowledge of strengths in real-world scenarios. In other words, the strengths-based curriculum may have been more beneficial to students—and more likely to yield favorable results—if the content had been more narrowly tailored toward specific knowledge or skill outcomes.

Another consideration is that the researcher had minimal opportunity to train or collaborate with seminar instructors in the study. This was a deliberate choice in order to ensure that the training of treatment section instructors mirrored that of control section instructors. The researcher therefore relied primarily on email and written communication to instructors teaching strengths-based sections. This increased the likelihood that the curriculum and activities may not have been implemented as consistently across these sections. Greater opportunity for in-person training and conversation amongst instructors could have mitigated this possibility.

### **Question 3**

Univariate ANOVAs to address the third research question were not considered due to the lack of statistically significant results from the MANCOVA conducted for the second question (Mertler & Vannatta, 2013).

### **Implications for Practice**

The results of this study are instructive for practitioners who work with college students in a number of ways.

#### **Strengths Development and Mindset**

In their 2011 article, Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, and Minhas suggest that much of the practical usage of strengths-based approaches has resulted in an “identify and use” (p. 108) mentality on the part of practitioners. This often emphasizes identification and understanding of an individual’s talents, followed by encouragement and coaching regarding opportunities to leverage those capacities more frequently and fully. Such initiatives tend to hold heightened self-awareness as a primary intended outcome. These authors believe that, though the aims of the ‘identify and use’ approach may be well-intentioned and warranted to some extent, the view presents some shortcomings in practice. One concern is that this perspective is “more aligned to classical personality psychology in which strengths are viewed as relatively immutable traits” (p. 110). Ironically, viewing strengths as stable qualities can actually discourage the application of requisite effort for success, leading to underperformance. A related challenge is that this view may not adequately recognize the interaction of strengths with values and interests, which have been shown to be fluid over time.

An additional problem is that merely labeling strengths and promoting their use can disregard the significance of context. Greater awareness of one's strengths should result in discernment about the *best* uses of those abilities, not simply a desire to use them more. Also, certain contexts may bring out talents that are not manifested in the usual course of an individual's life. This diminishes the likelihood of assessment of those capacities, though they may be quite strong when triggering circumstances arise. Similarly, Biswas-Diener et al. also fear that the 'identify and use' approach treats individuals' strengths as though they exist in isolation. This is demonstrated in reflection prompts or invitations that ask for individuals to share about their top talent themes, as though those capacities appear apart from the relationships, circumstances, and other nuances of the person's lived experiences.

Ultimately, these researchers advocate for wisdom in strengths usage as perhaps the primary desired outcome for strengths-based efforts. To that end, they encourage a strengths development approach that goes beyond simply promoting strengths usage:

The strengths development approach is distinguished by the assumption that strengths interventions are not primarily about the use of strengths for performance (as in, "how could you use this strength more?" or "where do you see opportunities to use this strength?") but should be primarily about developing strengths (as in, "how might you know when you should use this strength more and when you should use it less" or "what is the impact of your strengths use on others and how does that feedback suggest you might better use your strength?").  
(pp. 108-109)

While they are highly supportive of strengths-based efforts in professional practice, they contend that those adopting these approaches must do so with a sophisticated understanding of what is ultimately effective.

Louis' (2008) findings support the recommendation to emphasize the development of existing talents. In fact, her research found that students who were exposed to strengths from a talent identification perspective—akin to the 'identify and use' approach discussed by Biswas-Diener et al. (2011)—rather than a strengths development perspective demonstrated greater tendency toward a fixed mindset (Dweck, 2006). A fixed mindset adopts a view that traits such as intelligence and aspects of personality are largely unalterable; consequently, efforts to change those qualities may be seen as fruitless and unnecessary. In other words, Louis found that a strengths intervention formulated from a talent identification standpoint actually discouraged students from investing effort toward further development of their talents. She echoed the sentiments of Biswas-Diener et al. (2011) in asserting that:

many of the existing strengths-based programs... have mistaken the means for the end in their implicit assumption that the purpose of introducing students to their areas of talent is a sufficient outcome in and of itself, while largely ignoring the charge to help students consider that their talents are merely the raw materials for making contributions of significance. (p. 194)

Louis (2008) and Biswas-Diener et al. (2011) also find commonality in their recommendations that strengths-based initiatives should be aimed at fostering a growth mindset. According to Dweck (2006), a growth mindset reflects a "belief that your basic

qualities are things you can cultivate through your efforts. Although people may differ in every which way—in their initial talents and aptitudes, interests, or temperaments—everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (p. 7). A growth mindset can be nurtured, and even brief interventions have been shown to produce significant change from a fixed to a growth mindset (Sriram, 2010). A shift from a fixed to a growth mindset can have a dramatic effect on students’ perceptions of effort and the role it plays in success (Hong, et al., 1999; Dweck, 2006), leading to greater sense of influence over one’s achievements. Aronson, Fried, and Good (2002) found that fostering a growth mindset in a group of African American students at Stanford led to reports of increased satisfaction with the academic experience, higher grade point averages, and increased academic engagement compared to control groups, after controlling for students’ SAT scores. Thus, the suggestions from Biswas-Diener et al. (2011) and Louis (2008) to employ strengths as a platform for increasing students’ growth mindset could lead to positive outcomes that are directly connected to success in college.

Considered together, these concepts suggest that an individual’s existing talents can be productively applied toward continued personal growth and development and toward meaningful contributions in one’s various roles and contexts. As practitioners seek to incorporate strengths-based initiatives in their work with students, it is imperative that these efforts go beyond labeling talents and instead promote ongoing investment in, refined usage of, and nuanced understanding of those talents.

Additionally, efforts to intentionally connect strengths and growth mindset should be explored.

### **Tailored Outcomes and Content**

As discussed previously, one consideration in this study's lack of significant findings is the breadth of outcomes for the seminar intervention, particularly given limited class time. The number and scope of stated outcomes were quite possibly contributors to the minimal effects of either the treatment or control interventions. This situation likely occurs regularly throughout higher education, within formal and informal educational contexts. In their attempts to cover as much content or have as great of an impact as possible, well-meaning educators of all forms no doubt are at times overly ambitious. The unfortunate result may be that many of the messages are minimally delivered, minimally processed, or both. Instead, students may be better served by high-quality attention to a smaller number of outcomes that can be explored in greater depth. Kuh et al. (2005) stress that:

simply *offering* various programs and services does not foster student success. Programs and practices must be tailored to and resonate with the students they are intended to reach, be of reasonably high quality, and actually touch large numbers of students *in a meaningful way*. (p. 264)

The same could be true in regards to a particular model or theory utilized. For example, the thriving construct employed in this study consists of five first-order factors with additional related factors. As with the outcomes of the seminar, the intervention may have been more effective if certain factors within the thriving construct were

prioritized. Curriculum and program designers ought to distill their desired results to the greatest extent possible, then work diligently to ensure that these outcomes are continually emphasized and pursued throughout the course of the intervention. As effective educators are keenly aware, the selected content and pedagogy should be highly-tailored to match the articulated outcomes.

### **Wholehearted Institutional Commitment**

A related recommendation is that institutions must fully commit to chosen initiatives aimed at fostering student success. The intervention in this study was likely too brief or otherwise limited to result in significant impact on students. To be truly effective, first-year seminars in particular may require greater intentionality in a number of areas, including: deeper content and curriculum, higher expectations of students, more frequent gatherings, opportunities for meaningful conversations with instructors, or other considerations. In some respects, the institution's overall buy-in for and investment in a particular program may be more important than the specific content or design. Such support could be represented in a variety of ways, such as awarding academic credit, providing resources and education to promote teaching effectiveness, offering stipends or other instructor incentives, or eliminating other programs that might dilute institutional attention for a particular initiative. Practitioners ought to regularly evaluate the actual effects of any orientation programs and be willing to make potentially difficult decisions about what is and is not effective.

## **Moving Beyond Retention**

In the thriving framework, administrators and educators who work with college students now have a rich and viable conceptualization of student success that offers research-based pillars of a meaningful college experience. The present reality, however, is that the academy as a whole is entrenched in the view that persistence to graduation serves as a worthy barometer of institutional effectiveness. Igniting an industry-wide or even individual institution-wide conversation about student success and how it is measured will take a sea change. Schreiner (2010a) notes that embracing a new vision of student success requires that “we begin to measure what matters—the development of a perspective on themselves, the world, and their future that equips students for success not only in college, but, more important, in life” (p. 10). For many, however, these ambitions will be seen as idealistic and too abstract for broad appeal. Administrators primarily interested in the bottom line of retention may be particularly wary of efforts to reframe the traditional understanding of success. To be sure, retention and graduation rates are in many ways the currency of higher education administration. Proponents of a holistic construct such as thriving will likely have an uphill battle as they advocate for more nuanced understanding and measurement of success in college. Taking up this charge will require prudence and a growing chorus of supporters.

Practitioners for whom thriving is resonant and inspiring will likely have to seek ways to infuse this model alongside existing notions and structures at their campuses. Most institutions will not eschew a principal focus on retention, so the burden will be on individuals to demonstrate the value of thriving above the comfort of retention. One

prospective strategy is for practitioners to advance thriving as a pathway to student persistence. As noted, Tinto's (1975) pillars of social and academic integration are widely accepted as essential ingredients in successful transition to college. Yet as Bean and Eaton (2002) point out, these elements on their own offer "no explanation of the mechanisms by which activities would lead to increased academic or social integration and reduced attrition" (p. 74). Scholarly work such as that by Kuh (2008) on high-impact practices suggests specific institutional efforts that may contribute to student success. While support for these practices has been widespread, adoption of such initiatives can risk being formulaic or may simply be untenable at a specific institution for a variety of reasons. Rather than presenting a prescribed set of programs, the thriving framework provides a rich collection of outcomes that can be incorporated creatively across a limitless range of programs. For instance, practitioners could adopt Social Connectedness, Diverse Citizenship, and Psychological Sense of Community and supporting research for each as more robust outcomes and guides than the broader notion of social integration.

Practitioners might also assert the value of thriving by articulating ways in which the concept advances current understanding of student success. In Schreiner's (2010a) words:

Our question was, 'What does knowing a student's level of thriving *add* to our understanding of the variation in their success, over and above the traditional predictors of gender, ethnicity, generation status, high school grades, and admission test scores?' After controlling for these factors, as well as for key

factors of the institutions these students attended, we found that the five elements of thriving explained an additional 8 to 18 percent of the variation in such outcomes as college grades, intent to graduate, self-reported learning gains, and institutional fit. (pp. 5-6)

This suggests that measuring and seeking to foster student thriving can provide richer data about outcomes associated with student persistence. In other words, advocates of thriving can seek to advance the construct and a more holistic view of student success from within the retention success narrative. While their broader ambition may be that the academy ultimately embraces the thriving model or a related concept, these practitioners can employ the language of the prevailing paradigm even as they champion a new approach.

### **No Panacea Exists**

This study also offers a reminder that no program or initiative should be treated by practitioners as a sort of silver bullet that can quickly and easily yield student transformation, despite evidence to support potential efficacy. Strengths-based efforts and first-year seminars are both well-supported by research literature, and both are employed in a myriad of ways at many institutions. Yet practitioners are wise to remember that neither initiative can guarantee desired outcomes. On the contrary, as demonstrated by Louis (2008), overly simplistic applications of strengths-focused content, for example, could stifle the exertion of effort that actually does lead to personal change. College student personnel are often eager to employ best practices, particularly when increased retention is touted as a likely result. One danger, however, is that

practices deemed effective in the main can be adopted in an almost prescriptive fashion, without deep consideration of the specific context or needs of an individual institution's students. Practitioners can also be quick to embrace the positive aspects of new strategies or concepts and minimize downsides. For instance, Biswas-Diener et al. (2011) state that, "Although there is a mounting case for the benefits of attention to strengths, there is currently little agreement on how best to use theory, practice, research, and assessment tools related to psychological strengths" (p. 107). They go on to suggest that a gulf often exists between research and practice, noting that practitioners are likely to "work with strengths on an ad hoc basis" (p. 107) and may give limited attention to insights from outside their campuses.

### **Implications for Research**

Further research is warranted in a number of areas related to this study.

#### **Thriving as an Outcome Variable(s)**

First, additional scholarly work utilizing the thriving construct is needed. Much of the prior research on thriving has employed structural equation modeling (SEM) to identify predictors of thriving for various student populations (McIntosh, 2012; Cuevas, 2015; Petridis, 2015). Whitaker (2014) used a hierarchical multiple regression design to explore the extent to which thriving factors were predictive of grade point average. Elsewhere, SEM has been adopted to study the variance in student thriving scores that could be accounted for by participation in outdoor adventure programs (Rude, 2015). The groundwork has been laid for additional research that examines the effects of specific programs and interventions on student thriving. The present study serves as the

first foray into this type of research, heeding Rude's (2015) charge that "future research should be structured to explore thriving as a dependent variable" (p. 127). Thriving provides a fitting model and an appropriate set of outcomes for a vast range of potential empirical studies concerning college students. The construct also gives researchers a framework that illuminates actual dimensions of student well-being, as opposed to relying on measures of persistence that offer virtually no insights into psychological functioning or overall development.

At the same time, research must demonstrate the viability of the thriving framework and the ability of interventions to positively influence thriving levels. The robustness of the model may prove such demonstration challenging, particularly with small sample sizes. As may be the case with the present study, the threshold of intensity or duration for a specific program's effectiveness may be rather high. One suggestion for future research is to design a study with multiple similar interventions that vary in a number of key aspects, such as duration, frequency, format, etc. Pretests and posttests could be administered to participants in each treatment experience to assess the relative impact of the various interventions.

### **Thriving Over Time**

Future research could also explore the nature of student thriving throughout the college years. Longitudinal studies stand to offer considerable insights about potential fluctuations in thriving measures over time. Researchers may discover that patterns emerge in the data, perhaps even yielding common stages or profiles of thriving. Longitudinal data from the entire college experience could offer rich understanding, as

could data from within the first year alone. The first year and the first semester in particular are fertile ground for continued exploration of student thriving. As this study has asserted, the thriving construct is an exceptional fit for the needs of first-year students and the aspirations of many existing transition support programs.

### **Impact of First-Year Programs on Psychological Sense of Community**

Prior studies have found that Psychological Sense of Community (PSC) is highly predictive of overall thriving (Nelson & Vetter, 2012; Rude, 2015; Petridis, 2014; Cuevas, 2015). A worthwhile area of study would be examining the contributions of specific orientation and transition programs on PSC. Orientation programs have been shown to positively affect students' social integration (Pascarella, Terenzini, & Wolfle, 1986), which bears considerable resemblance to the PSC concept. Helping students connect with and feel part of the campus community is vital, yet many administrators may question the legitimacy or the seriousness of initiatives that prioritize relational and social outcomes. Schreiner (2013) even states that "creating a sense of community on campus is the single best way to help all students thrive" (p. 46). Existing research seems to support the importance of students' sense of belonging on campus, but further work regarding Psychological Sense of Community in particular would be valuable.

### **Strengths-Based Efforts as Pathways to Student Thriving**

The intrapersonal dimension of thriving has a single factor, Positive Perspective. This component enables students to take initiative even in the face of challenge, to set goals and identify and employ effective strategies to pursue those goals, to adopt an optimistic view of the future, and to see themselves as powerful agents in shaping what

that future will be (Schreiner, 2010a). Schreiner (2010a) suggests several strategies for helping students learn this “optimistic explanatory style” (Seligman, 1990), including teaching students how to identify, develop, and apply their strengths. While the present study did not find evidence that the strengths-based seminar examined here led to a significant change in students’ thriving in any of the factors, further exploration of the efficacy of strengths-based initiatives as a pathway to enhanced thriving is needed. Research ought to examine the effects of strengths-based interventions on Positive Perspective specifically—in alignment with Schreiner’s recommendation—but also on each factor of the thriving model.

### **Student Populations and Samples**

Similar studies on first-year students could also be conducted at different types of institutions and with various student populations. The students in this study were from a single institution and exhibited considerable homogeneity in characteristics such as living on campus, taking a full-time course load, having strong academic backgrounds prior to college, and being of traditional first-time-in-college age. Conducting studies across multiple campuses would also be valuable, enabling comparisons of specific interventions across institutions. A larger sample size would be beneficial in future research, as sample size is highly correlated with overall effect size (Mertler & Vannatta, 2013).

### **Seminar Bearing Academic Credit**

A final recommendation pertinent to this study is for additional research to be conducted using a first-year seminar intervention that bears academic credit. A seminar

offering at least one hour of credit would no doubt afford greater opportunity for students to engage with course content—including out-of-class readings and projects—as well as foster deeper relationships with instructors and fellow students. Prior research has indicated that conversations with peers and with faculty about strengths can lead to increased persistence (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015), and regular interaction would provide more opportunities for these types of discussions. Additionally, students may exhibit greater commitment to the seminar if academic credit was awarded.

Encouragement for examination of strengths-based efforts within a more in-depth first-year seminar setting is perhaps the strongest recommendation following this study.

### **Conclusion**

The first year in college has received considerable attention in recent decades, as scholars and practitioners alike have recognized the critical nature of this time in students' lives. Institutions have implemented a flurry of initiatives to support students as they enter the college environment and navigate the unique challenges and opportunities therein. A mainstay of these transition programs is the first-year seminar, which has been considered “the most researched innovation in higher education” (Tobolowsky, Cox, & Wagner, 2005). Yet for all this scrutiny, scholars such as Porter and Swing (2006) observe that “there is not much known about the impact of first-year seminars” (p. 90). They base this assertion on their view that most research on seminars looks at overall effect on outcomes such as retention, as opposed to exploring the specific elements that may be contributing to those results. Furthermore, much of the literature on transition programs relies on student persistence as the ultimate outcome of

interest. This study endeavored to broaden the knowledge base of first-year seminars by examining the effects of a seminar intervention on an emerging construct of student well-being called thriving. The curriculum for the treatment condition in the study incorporated an emphasis on talent identification and development using the Clifton StrengthsFinder (Gallup, 1999) assessment. While the research yielded no significant change in student thriving as a result of the intervention, the findings of the study nonetheless offer valuable contributions to literature and practice.

Conceptually, the thriving construct offers a promising vision of success that is concerned with more than retention and may ultimately help shift the dominant paradigm. Refocusing institutional attention back on students themselves and their personal journeys is critically important. Much of the appeal of the ‘success as persistence’ paradigm is that retention is relatively straightforward to measure and results in data that is comparable across institutions (Schreiner, 2013). However, this tidy appearance masks the true complexity of student success. Moreover, the direct effects of a single intervention or experience on overall persistence are challenging to adequately ascertain. Embracing a holistic model of student success such as thriving places student development at the forefront, as well as provides robust outcomes that can serve as a roadmap of what a meaningful college experience can entail. After all, “the ultimate goal of the thriving perspective is to inspire interventions that enable more students to flourish during their college years and beyond” (Kinzie, 2012, p. xxvi).

Yet while thriving may rest on solid theoretical grounding, the challenge ahead is demonstrating that the model actually serves institutions and students in a practical

sense. The multi-faceted nature of the thriving model may make demonstration of interventions' effects more challenging, as could be the case in this study. This complexity may also serve as a deterrent to researchers or practitioners looking to evaluate the effectiveness of programs. Ongoing investigation of the construct and its tenets will be necessary if it is to gain widespread traction.

A related exhortation is that deep examination should be taking place regarding the implementation of programs themselves. Efforts such as strengths-based initiatives and first-year seminars have garnered wide support and are prevalent across college campuses. Thus the temptation may be for institutions to embrace best practices such as these with a broad sense of their effectiveness, but perhaps without sophisticated knowledge of the pedagogies and content that most contribute to student success within those initiatives. The lack of significant findings in this study serves as a call for sustained commitment to what *actually* impacts the students at a particular institution, not merely an uncritical adoption of practices that are believed to be effective in general.

For practitioners and researchers seeking more holistic articulations of student success in and after college, thriving is a welcome and highly usable model. Further work is needed in order to gain a richer understanding of the types of experiences that enhance thriving, but the essential groundwork has been laid. Thriving and its supporting research also stand to play a significant role in advancing conversations across higher education about what educators hope to empower students to pursue, rather than predominantly what they hope to help them avoid.

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**APPENDIX A**

**THE THRIVING QUOTIENT™ PRETEST INSTRUMENT**

**THE THRIVING QUOTIENT™**  
Pretest

**Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey on first-year student success. This survey will take about 10-15 minutes to complete. By completing this survey, you are granting us permission to use your results in our research study. No individual information will ever be reported or released from this survey; only the researchers will see individual data and only grouped data will ever be reported.**

**First, we'd like to know about how you usually approach academic experiences. Think back to your most recent academic setting (such as high school, for instance) as you answer the following questions. Please rate your agreement with each of the items by using a 1 to 6 scale, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 6 indicating "strongly agree."**

	<u>SD</u>					<u>SA</u>
1. I usually feel as though I am learning things in my classes that are worthwhile to me as a person.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. I can usually find ways of applying what I'm learning in class to something else in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. I am confident I will reach my educational goals.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. I usually find myself thinking about what I'm learning in class even when I'm not in class.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. Even if assignments are not interesting to me, I find a way to keep working at them until they are done well.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. I usually feel energized by the ideas I am learning in most of my classes.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. I know how to apply my strengths to achieve academic success.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I am good at juggling all the demands of college life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. Other people would say I'm a hard worker.	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Now please think about your life RIGHT NOW – this week—as a college student on this campus as you answer these next questions.**

10. I feel like I belong here.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. Other people seem to make friends more easily than I do.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. Being a student here fills an important need in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. I spend time making a difference in other people's lives.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. I feel proud of the college or university I attend.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. I don't have as many close friends as I wish I had.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. There is a strong sense of community on this campus.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. I value interacting with people whose viewpoints are different from my own.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. I feel like my friends really care about me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. When things are uncertain, I tend to expect the worst.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. I know I can make a difference in my community.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. It is important to become aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds.	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. I feel content with the kinds of friendships I currently have.	1	2	3	4	5	6
23. My spiritual or religious beliefs provide me with a sense of strength when life is difficult.	1	2	3	4	5	6

24. When I'm faced with a problem in my life, I can usually think of several ways to solve it.	1	2	3	4	5	6
25. My perspective on life is that I tend to see the glass as "half full" rather than "half empty."	1	2	3	4	5	6
26. My spiritual or religious beliefs give meaning/purpose to my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
27. It's hard to make friends on this campus.	1	2	3	4	5	6
28. My life has a purpose because I am part of something greater than myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6
29. It's important for me to make a contribution to my community.	1	2	3	4	5	6
30. I look for the best in situations, even when things seem hopeless.	1	2	3	4	5	6
31. My knowledge or opinions have been influenced or changed by becoming more aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds.	1	2	3	4	5	6
32. I often feel lonely because I have few close friends with whom to share my concerns.	1	2	3	4	5	6
33. My spiritual or religious beliefs are the foundation of my approach to life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
34. I am confident that the amount of money I'm paying for college is worth it in the long run.	1	2	3	4	5	6
35. I intend to re-enroll at this institution next year.	1	2	3	4	5	6
36. I intend to graduate from this institution.	1	2	3	4	5	6
37. Given my current goals, this institution is a good fit for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
38. If I had it to do over again, I would choose a different university to attend.	1	2	3	4	5	6
39. I really enjoy being a student here.	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Finally, please tell us a little about yourself. Your answers will be grouped with those of other students to help us understand our students better. No individual information will be reported for any reason.**

Student ID: \_\_\_\_\_ (to be used only to match pretest and posttest; all students will be assigned a code after matching)

Are you the first in your immediate family to attend college? \_\_\_ yes \_\_\_ no

Gender: \_\_\_ female \_\_\_ male

Age: \_\_\_ 17 or younger \_\_\_ 18-20 \_\_\_ 21-23 \_\_\_ 24-26 \_\_\_ 27-30 \_\_\_ over 30

How would you describe your grades in high school?

- \_\_\_ mostly A's
- \_\_\_ mostly A's and B's
- \_\_\_ mostly B's
- \_\_\_ mostly B's and C's
- \_\_\_ mostly C's
- \_\_\_ below a C average

What is the HIGHEST degree you intend to pursue in your lifetime?

- \_\_\_ none \_\_\_ bachelor's \_\_\_ teaching credential \_\_\_ master's degree
- \_\_\_ doctorate \_\_\_ medical or law degree \_\_\_ other graduate degree (specify)

What is your best guess about your household income level?

- less than \$30,000 a year
- \$30,000 to \$59,999
- \$60,000 to \$89,999
- \$90,000 to 119,999
- \$120,000 and over

Do you live on campus?  yes  no

Do you work for pay?  no  on campus  off campus  both on and off campus

Collecting information about race and ethnicity assists colleges to understand the varying needs of students on campus. How do you identify your racial or ethnic family background?

- African-American / Black
- American Indian / Alaskan Native
- Asian-American/Asian/Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander
- Caucasian / White
- Latino / Hispanic
- Multiethnic
- Other (specify: )
- Prefer not to respond

Are you an international student?  yes  no

How sure are you of your major?

- Very Unsure
- Unsure
- Somewhat Unsure
- Somewhat Sure
- Sure
- Very Sure

When you chose to enroll in this institution, was it your first choice?  yes  no

Are you a member of an intercollegiate athletic team on this campus?  yes  no

What is your current religious preference? (Select one)

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Baptist          | <input type="checkbox"/> Hindu                   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Lutheran         | <input type="checkbox"/> Roman Catholic          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Buddhist         | <input type="checkbox"/> Islamic                 |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Methodist        | <input type="checkbox"/> Seventh Day Adventist   |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Eastern Orthodox | <input type="checkbox"/> Jewish                  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Presbyterian     | <input type="checkbox"/> Unitarian/Universalist  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Episcopalian     | <input type="checkbox"/> LDS (Mormon)            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Quaker           | <input type="checkbox"/> United Church of Christ |

Other Christian religion: \_\_\_\_\_

Other religion: \_\_\_\_\_

None

**THANK YOU for completing this survey!**

**APPENDIX B**

**THE THRIVING QUOTIENT™ POSTTEST INSTRUMENT**

**THE THRIVING QUOTIENT™**  
**Posttest**

**Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey on first-year student success. This survey will take about 10-15 minutes to complete. By completing this survey, you are granting us permission to use your results in our research study. No individual information will ever be reported or released from this survey; only the researchers will see individual data and only grouped data will ever be reported.**

**Please rate your agreement with each of the items by using a 1 to 6 scale, with 1 indicating "strongly disagree" and 6 indicating "strongly agree."**

	<u>SD</u>					<u>SA</u>
1. I feel as though I am learning things in my classes that are worthwhile to me as a person.	1	2	3	4	5	6
2. I can usually find ways of applying what I'm learning in class to something else in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
3. I am confident I will reach my educational goals.	1	2	3	4	5	6
4. I find myself thinking about what I'm learning in class even when I'm not in class.	1	2	3	4	5	6
5. Even if assignments are not interesting to me, I find a way to keep working at them until they are done well.	1	2	3	4	5	6
6. I feel energized by the ideas I am learning in most of my classes.	1	2	3	4	5	6
7. I know how to apply my strengths to achieve academic success.	1	2	3	4	5	6
8. I am good at juggling all the demands of college life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
9. Other people would say I'm a hard worker.	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Now please think about your life RIGHT NOW – this week—as a college student on this campus as you answer these next questions.**

10. I feel like I belong here.	1	2	3	4	5	6
11. Other people seem to make friends more easily than I do.	1	2	3	4	5	6
12. Being a student here fills an important need in my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
13. I spend time making a difference in other people's lives.	1	2	3	4	5	6
14. I feel proud of the college or university I attend.	1	2	3	4	5	6
15. I don't have as many close friends as I wish I had.	1	2	3	4	5	6
16. There is a strong sense of community on this campus.	1	2	3	4	5	6
17. I value interacting with people whose viewpoints are different from my own.	1	2	3	4	5	6
18. I feel like my friends really care about me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
19. When things are uncertain, I tend to expect the worst.	1	2	3	4	5	6
20. I know I can make a difference in my community.	1	2	3	4	5	6
21. It is important to become aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds.	1	2	3	4	5	6
22. I feel content with the kinds of friendships I currently have.	1	2	3	4	5	6
23. My spiritual or religious beliefs provide me with a sense of strength when life is difficult.	1	2	3	4	5	6
24. When I'm faced with a problem in my life, I can usually think of several ways to solve it.	1	2	3	4	5	6

25. My perspective on life is that I tend to see the glass as "half full" rather than "half empty."	1	2	3	4	5	6
26. My spiritual or religious beliefs give meaning/purpose to my life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
27. It's hard to make friends on this campus.	1	2	3	4	5	6
28. My life has a purpose because I am part of something greater than myself.	1	2	3	4	5	6
29. It's important for me to make a contribution to my community.	1	2	3	4	5	6
30. I look for the best in situations, even when things seem hopeless.	1	2	3	4	5	6
31. My knowledge or opinions have been influenced or changed by becoming more aware of the perspectives of individuals from different backgrounds.	1	2	3	4	5	6
32. I often feel lonely because I have few close friends with whom to share my concerns.	1	2	3	4	5	6
33. My spiritual or religious beliefs are the foundation of my approach to life.	1	2	3	4	5	6
34. I am confident that the amount of money I'm paying for college is worth it in the long run.	1	2	3	4	5	6
35. I intend to re-enroll at this institution next year.	1	2	3	4	5	6
36. I intend to graduate from this institution.	1	2	3	4	5	6
37. Given my current goals, this institution is a good fit for me.	1	2	3	4	5	6
38. If I had it to do over again, I would choose a different university to attend.	1	2	3	4	5	6
39. I really enjoy being a student here.	1	2	3	4	5	6
40. Overall, the actions of faculty, staff, and administrators on this campus are consistent with the mission of the institution.	1	2	3	4	5	6
41. My experiences on campus so far have met my expectations.	1	2	3	4	5	6
42. This institution was accurately portrayed during the admissions process.	1	2	3	4	5	6

**How often do you participate in the following:**

	<b>Never</b>			<b>Frequently</b>		
Student organizations on campus	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Campus events or activities	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Leadership of student organizations	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Community service	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Interaction with faculty outside of class	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Fraternity/sorority	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Religious services or activities	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>
Campus ethnic organizations	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>

**Please rate your satisfaction with each of the following:**

	<b>Very Dissatisfied</b>			<b>Very Satisfied</b>		
The amount you are learning in your classes.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Your overall experiences at this university.	1	2	3	4	5	6
The amount of contact you have had with faculty this year.	1	2	3	4	5	6

The academic advising you have received this year.	1	2	3	4	5	6
The kinds of interaction you have with other students on this campus this year.	1	2	3	4	5	6
The quality of the interaction you have with faculty on this campus so far this year.	1	2	3	4	5	6
The interactions you have had this year with students of different ethnic backgrounds.	1	2	3	4	5	6
The amount of money you personally have to pay to attend college here.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Faculty sensitivity to the needs of diverse students.	1	2	3	4	5	6
Your physical health right now.	1	2	3	4	5	6

**Finally, please tell us a little about yourself. Your answers will be grouped with those of other students to help us understand our students better. No individual information will be reported for any reason.**

Student ID: \_\_\_\_\_ (to be used only to match pretest and posttest; all students will be assigned a code after matching)

How sure are you of your major?

Very Unsure  Unsure  Somewhat Unsure  Somewhat Sure  Sure  Very Sure

Considering the financial aid you've received and the money you and your family have, how much difficulty have you had so far in paying for your school expenses?

- no difficulty
- a little difficulty
- some difficulty
- a fair amount of difficulty
- great difficulty

We are interested in what helps students thrive in college. Thriving is defined as getting the most out of your college experience, so that you are intellectually, socially, and psychologically engaged and enjoying the college experience. Given that definition, to what extent do you think you are THRIVING as a college student this semester?

- not even surviving
- barely surviving
- surviving
- somewhat thriving
- thriving most of the time
- consistently thriving

What has happened this semester that has led to your perception of whether you are thriving or not?

**THANK YOU for completing this survey!**

**APPENDIX C**

**PRETEST INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey on student success as part of a national project to better understand the college student experience.

By completing this survey, I agree to participate voluntarily in the research project being conducted by Baylor University for the intended purpose of examining the influences of Baylor's U1000 experience on student success. I understand that there are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with my participation beyond the risks of ordinary daily life. Completion of the survey should take about 10 minutes and I understand I may withdraw my participation in the study at any time without incurring penalty or loss of benefits to which I may be otherwise entitled. Benefits for participation may include contributing to the quality and effectiveness of Baylor's programs for new students as well as representation in the study. I understand the results of the study will be used in three ways: (1) as part of the national study, results may be grouped and reported to colleges and universities across the U.S. to help them understand college students, (2) by Baylor University to improve students' experiences on campus, and (3) as part of a dissertation study on programs for first-year students.

This project has two phases to it: 1) the current survey, and 2) a follow-up survey at the end of the U1000 experience.

We will protect your anonymity and confidentiality when reporting the results of the survey by only reporting grouped data and assigning an identification code for each participant. Completed surveys will be stored in a locked file drawer.

Participants must be 18 years or older to participate in this study. By completing the survey, you are showing that you have read and understand the informed consent process, you are at least 18 years of age, and you agree to participate in this project.

If you have questions about the research project or if you would like to obtain information regarding the results of the study, you may contact:

Nathan Shelburne  
One Bear Place #97150  
Waco, TX 76798  
Nathan\_Shelburne@baylor.edu  
(254) 710-7240

If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to you as a participant, please contact the Baylor University Committee for Protection of Human Subjects in Research, Dr. David Schlueter, Chair, Baylor University, One Bear Place #97368, Waco, TX 76798. Dr. Schlueter may also be reached at (254) 710-6920 or at (254) 710-3708.

**APPENDIX D**

**POSTTEST INFORMED CONSENT FORM**

Thank you for agreeing to complete this survey on student success as part of a national project to better understand the college student experience.

“By completing this survey, I agree to participate voluntarily in the research project being conducted by Baylor University for the intended purpose of examining the influences of Baylor’s U1000 experience on student success. I understand that there are no foreseeable risks or discomforts associated with my participation beyond the risks of ordinary daily life. Completion of the survey should take about 10 minutes and I understand I may withdraw my participation in the study at any time without incurring penalty or loss of benefits to which I may be otherwise entitled. Benefits for participation may include contributing to the quality and effectiveness of Baylor’s programs for new students as well as representation in the study. I understand the results of the study will be used in three ways: (1) as part of the national study, results may be grouped and reported to colleges and universities across the U.S. to help them understand college students, (2) by Baylor University to improve students’ experiences on campus, and (3) as part of a dissertation study on programs for first-year students.”

This survey is the second of two phases of the project: 1) a previously completed pre-test, and 2) the present survey.

We will protect your anonymity and confidentiality when reporting the results of the survey by only reporting grouped data and assigning an identification code for each participant. Completed surveys will be stored in a locked file drawer.

Participants must be 18 years or older to participate in this study. By completing the survey, you are showing that you have read and understand the informed consent process, you are at least 18 years of age, and you agree to participate in this project.

If you have questions about the research project or if you would like to obtain information regarding the results of the study, you may contact:

Nathan Shelburne  
One Bear Place #97150  
Waco, TX 76798  
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If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant, or any other aspect of the research as it relates to you as a participant, please contact the Baylor University Committee for Protection of Human Subjects in Research, Dr. David Schlueter, Chair, Baylor University, One Bear Place #97368, Waco, TX 76798. Dr. Schlueter may also be reached at (254) 710-6920 or at (254) 710-3708.

**APPENDIX E**

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD EXEMPTION – BAYLOR UNIVERSITY**



**BAYLOR**  
UNIVERSITY

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD**

One Bear Place #97310 Waco, TX 76798-7310 • (254) 710-3763 • FAX (254) 710-7309 • WEBSITE: [www.baylor.edu/research/irb](http://www.baylor.edu/research/irb)

DATE: 08/29/2014

TO: Nathan Shelburne

FROM: Office of the Vice Provost for Research, Research Compliance  
Baylor University Institutional Review Board

STUDY TITLE: Effects of a Strengths-Based New Student Experience Seminar on  
First-Year Student Thriving

IRB REFERENCE #: 642147

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project

ACTION: DETERMINATION OF EXEMPT STATUS

DECISION DATE: 08/29/2014

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption category 45 CFR 46.101(b)(2)

Thank you for your research study submission. Your research has been determined to be EXEMPT from IRB review according to federal regulation 45 CFR 46.101(b):

- (2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects' responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

This exemption determination is based on the protocol and/or materials submitted. If the research is modified, you must contact this office to determine whether your research is still eligible for exemption prior to implementing the modifications.

If you have any questions, please contact Deborah Holland at (254) 710-1438 or [Deborah\\_L\\_Holland@baylor.edu](mailto:Deborah_L_Holland@baylor.edu). Please include your study title and reference number in all correspondence with this office.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Deborah L. Holland". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized initial "D".

Deborah L. Holland, JD, MPH  
Assistant Vice Provost for Research  
Director of Compliance

**APPENDIX F**  
**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL – TEXAS A&M**  
**UNIVERSITY**

**DATE:** February 02, 2016

**MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** Glenda Musoba  
TAMU - College Of Education & Human Dev - Educational Adm & Human Resource Develop

**FROM:** Dr. James Fluckey  
Chair, TAMU IRB

**SUBJECT:** Expedited Approval

**Study Number:** IRB2015-0705D

**Title:** The Effects of a Strengths-Based First-Year Seminar on Student Thriving

**Date of Determination:**

**Approval Date:** 02/02/2016

**Continuing Review Due:** 01/01/2017

**Expiration Date:** 02/01/2017

**Documents Reviewed and Approved:**

Only IRB-stamped approved versions of study materials (e.g., consent forms, recruitment materials, and questionnaires) can be distributed to human participants. Please log into iRIS to download the stamped, approved version of all study materials. If you are unable to locate the stamped version in iRIS, please contact the iRIS Support Team at 979.845.4969 or the IRB liaison assigned to your area.

Submission Components			
Study Document			
Title	Version Number	Version Date	Outcome
Data will remain at Baylor	Version 1.0	01/26/2016	Approved
Dissertation Proposal - TAMU IRB	Version 1.0	09/02/2015	Approved
BU IRB Exemption Letter	Version 1.0	09/02/2015	Approved
BU Approved Consent Form	Version 1.0	09/02/2015	Approved

**Document of Consent:** Waiver approved under 45 CFR 46.117 (c) 1 or 2/ 21 CFR 56.109 (c)1

- Comments:**
- This protocol has been approved.
  - Research is to be conducted according to the study application approved by the IRB prior to implementation.

750 Agronomy Road, Suite 2701  
1186 TAMU  
College Station, TX 77843-1186  
Tel. 979.458.1467 Fax. 979.862.3176  
<http://rcb.tamu.edu>

- Any future correspondence should include the IRB study number and the study title.

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Investigators assume the following responsibilities:

1. **Continuing Review:** The study must be renewed by the expiration date in order to continue with the research. A Continuing Review application along with required documents must be submitted by the continuing review deadline. Failure to do so may result in processing delays, study expiration, and/or loss of funding.
2. **Completion Report:** Upon completion of the research study (including data collection and analysis), a Completion Report must be submitted to the IRB.
3. **Unanticipated Problems and Adverse Events:** Unanticipated problems and adverse events must be reported to the IRB immediately.
4. **Reports of Potential Non-compliance:** Potential non-compliance, including deviations from protocol and violations, must be reported to the IRB office immediately.
5. **Amendments:** Changes to the protocol and/or study documents must be requested by submitting an Amendment to the IRB for review. The Amendment must be approved by the IRB before being implemented.
6. **Consent Forms:** When using a consent form or information sheet, the IRB stamped approved version must be used. Please log into iRIS to download the stamped approved version of the consenting instruments. If you are unable to locate the stamped version in iRIS, please contact the iRIS Support Team at 979.845.4969 or the IRB liaison assigned to your area. Human participants are to receive a copy of the consent document, if appropriate.
7. **Post Approval Monitoring:** Expedited and full board studies may be subject to post approval monitoring. During the life of the study, please review and document study progress using the PI self-assessment found on the RCB website as a method of preparation for the potential review. Investigators are responsible for maintaining complete and accurate study records and making them available for post approval monitoring. Investigators are encouraged to request a pre-initiation site visit with the Post Approval Monitor. These visits are designed to help ensure that all necessary documents are approved and in order prior to initiating the study and to help investigators maintain compliance.
8. **Recruitment:** All approved recruitment materials will be stamped electronically by the HRPP staff and available for download from iRIS. These IRB-stamped approved documents from iRIS must be used for recruitment. For materials that are distributed to potential participants electronically and for which you can only feasibly use the approved text rather than the stamped document, the study's IRB Study Number, approval date, and expiration dates must be included in the following format: TAMU IRB#20XX-XXXX Approved: XX/XX/XXXX Expiration Date: XX/XX/XXXX.
9. **FERPA and PPRA:** Investigators conducting research with students must have appropriate approvals from the FERPA administrator at the institution where the research will be conducted in accordance with the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). The Protection of Pupil Rights Amendment (PPRA) protects the rights of parents in students ensuring that written parental consent is required for participation in surveys, analysis, or evaluation that ask questions falling into categories of protected information.
10. **Food:** Any use of food in the conduct of human research must follow Texas A&M University Standard Administrative Procedure 24.01.01.M4.02.
11. **Payments:** Any use of payments to human research participants must follow Texas A&M University Standard Administrative Procedure 21.01.99.M0.03.
12. **Records Retention:** Federal Regulations require records be retained for at least 3 years. Records of a study that collects protected health information are required to be retained for at least 6 years. Some sponsors require extended records retention. Texas A&M University rule 15.99.03.M1.03 Responsible Stewardship of Research Data requires that research records be retained on Texas A&M property.

This electronic document provides notification of the review results by the Institutional Review Board.

## **APPENDIX G**

### **OVERVIEW OF STRENGTHS-BASED CURRICULUM**

## Session 1 – Class Intro & “Community”

- Welcome!
- Introduction to the class and to the instructor
- College is a journey learning about self
  - You have countless opportunities to do this across virtually every part of your experience at Baylor—classes, roommates and other relationships, work, student groups, intramurals, service and ministry, road trips, etc.
  - One of the specific ways our class will help you do that is by exploring ideas about strengths
- Our class is also part of a study on the U1000 experience:
  - Distribute pre-test with informed consent form
- Get to know you activity
  - Example: Balloon activity
    - Each person writes an interesting personal fact (Ex. – “Something fascinating about yourself...”) on a small piece of paper, then puts paper inside a balloon
    - Everyone pops balloon at the same time
    - Each person finds a piece of paper, then tracks down whose paper it is
    - Find out name, hometown, major, etc.; then introduce your partner (along with their personal fact) to the rest of the class
- Thinking today about COMMUNITY:
  - Open Response → What comes to mind for you when you think of “community”?
  - Think. Pair. Share.
    - Personal experience of rich community...
    - Personal experience that lacked community...
  - Open Response → What does it take to experience community?
  - Instructor might offer personal experience of community...
  - Open Response → What are your hopes and expectations as you join the Baylor community?
- 2-minute paper → What will you personally do to “take membership in” and ownership of the Baylor community?
- One first step
  - Preparing for and ACTIVELY PARTICIPATING IN Late Night
  - Share an informational postcard that gives instructions and/or space to write down actions taken or actions needed
- To do for next class:

- If haven't already → Take StrengthsFinder assessment online (through goBaylor)
  - Contact New Student Programs at (254) 710-7240 if you need your code
- Log on to [www.strengthsquest.com](http://www.strengthsquest.com) and print your "Signature Theme Report"
- Bring your report to class next week

## Session 2 – Introduction to the Strengths Perspective

- Opening Icebreaker
- Follow up from Late Night:
  - Answer prompt questions?
  - Identify a next step?
- Today we’re getting into the heart of our focus in this course → some insights that hopefully will serve you as you continue to learn more and more about yourself
- Question for small groups of 3-4 → What are your biggest hopes for yourself in the things in which you really invest yourself and go for throughout your life?
  - (Possible responses below...)

Success	Competence / skill	Learning / growth
Compensation / living	Relationships	Contributing
Being fully engaged / present	Enjoyment	Blessing / investing in others

- Think. Pair. Share. → Think about an incredibly fulfilling/meaningful personal experience in your life.
  - Describe what was happening; who was involved, what you were thinking/feeling/doing, etc.
  - Why do you think it was so satisfying?
- Research suggests that individuals—across all professions and interests—experience these things most when they are able to utilize and leverage their individual talents and unique gifts:
  - The number one work motivator is emotion, not financial incentive: It’s the feeling of making progress every day toward a meaningful goal (Amabile & Kramer, 2011)
  - You and your best friend from home may have had very similar experiences through high school, yet you may answer the previous question in very different ways. And even the same fulfilling experiences may have been satisfying for each of you for very different reasons.
- Each of us takes in the world around us and goes about our lives in unique ways. What motivates one person may hold little value for another; similarly, how you naturally approach people and situations could be entirely different than others around you. It only makes sense that you will be most comfortable and “in your element” when you are able to make use of those natural tendencies and abilities.

- Example: Imagine you are going to take a painting class... It's your first day, and you start with a basic painting activity. How would you hold your paintbrush?
  - Intuitively, you would use your dominant hand; not your non-dominant hand, mouth, foot
  - You wouldn't even think about it!
  - But shouldn't you consider learning to paint better with your dominant hand, a clear comparative weakness?
  - What approach is likely lead to the greatest success?
  - Could you learn to paint with your other hand, or even your foot?
- This is the heart of the idea behind a "strengths approach" to learning and development. Your greatest potential lies in your areas of strength.
- Failure prevention vs. Success promotion → personal story: high school basketball
- "At My Best" worksheet → general reflections on positive personal characteristics and experiences
- Several tools that help people understand themselves and their strengths, but they share a common sense of "strengths"
  - Generic definition → "a capacity for feeling, thinking, and behaving in a way that allows optimal functioning in the pursuit of valued outcomes" (Rettew & Lopez, 2008, p. 2)
- StrengthsFinder: a particular tool used a lot with college students
- Ask students to get out their individual talent reports
  - Give some kind of response questions (perhaps the "At First Glance" worksheet?)
- Instructor might talk briefly about his/her personal strengths and how they play themselves out
- To do for next class:
  - Share your individual talent report with someone who knows you well (a parent, close friend, mentor, etc.)
  - Ask for their feedback about the report and for specific examples or times when they have seen these characteristics in you

### Session 3 – Exploring StrengthsFinder Talents

- Opening Icebreaker – This or That? (see separate document)
- Following up on where we left off last time:
  1. What is your reaction at this point to your top 5 talent themes?
  2. How well do you feel your talent themes describe you?
  3. What feedback did you get from the person with whom you shared your results?
  4. What is one example of how you have seen at least one of your talents play out in your life?
- Instructor might share examples of personal talent themes in his/her own life...
- Strengths name card tents (Instructor may want to bring pieces of yarn/string for students to tie name cards around their necks. This could make it easier for students to identify what others' talents are.)
- Strengths Scavenger Hunt (see separate document):
  - Find 3 different people with at least one talent in common (Name, Theme, Benefit)
  - Find 3 different people with a talent you don't have (Name, Theme, Benefit)
  - What did you learn, either about a talent you have or one you don't?
- The “Strengths” tool offers some language and definitions for innate human characteristics that we all possess in some measure, but that show up in unique ways in each of us. These characteristics and tendencies influence how we naturally approach situations, people, tasks, etc. A few examples...
  - *WOO* and *Relator* may naturally approach relationships with people very differently. A relator may find it more challenging to form what they consider “close” friendships because they crave very deep relationships with a small handful of people. Someone with *WOO* is energized by meeting as many new people as possible and may be more likely to people they have a very large circle of “close” friends. Each has tremendous strength and benefits, and there are challenges that come with each.
  - *Deliberate* and *Activator* are likely to approach a new task or project very differently. The person with the deliberate talent may intuitively think through all the possibilities very thoroughly, select the most appropriate one for the situation, then think through all of the necessary steps before taking action on any of them. Meanwhile, the person with activator saw that something needed action and jumped in headfirst to get started. The deliberate talent brings strength of thoughtfulness and intentionality, yet the

risk is that the process is likely to take a very long time—often too long! The activator talent enables people to select an approach and initiate action, but at times this could come at the expense of considering other alternatives and thoroughly thinking through possibilities.

- *Futuristic* and *Context* are likely to find their comfort and look for support in very different places. The context talent finds security in and seeks to gain knowledge from the past. Individuals with this talent want to know “how we got here” and draw on this information in thinking about moving forward. The futuristic talent is inspired by fresh thinking and about “what could be.” These individuals are often excited by opportunity to go in a new direction or innovate.
- These are just a few examples that highlight the unique perspectives each of us brings to virtually all that we do. It makes sense that we stand to contribute the most and get the most satisfaction when we can work *with* these qualities rather than having to try to work *around* them.
  - Instructor might ask students for personal examples they may have seen or can think of...
- Next time we will be looking at how understanding talents can improve our relationships with others, as well as how to turn natural talents into true “strengths.”
- Open up for questions about talents/strengths from the group...
- Announcements

## Session 4 – Cultivating Strengths

- Taking stock of your first 6 weeks: (encourage everyone to share!)
  - Instructor might encourage students to think specifically about 3 areas – 1) academic, 2) relational, 3) personal
  - What is going well?
  - What is not going as well?
- Looking at talents more closely
  - Two imaginary people (pick a collection of talents for each character):
    - Staci – Includer, Learner, Positivity, Input, Responsibility
    - Marcus – Command, Significance, WOO, Positivity, Communication
  - Small group questions (go through first 3 for Staci, then for Marcus):
    1. How is Staci likely to approach a new group project?
    2. What is a situation in which she is likely to feel most comfortable?
    3. What is a situation in which she is likely to feel least comfortable?
    4. Imagine that Staci and Marcus are working on the same group project with 2 others.
      - a. How will their talents complement one another?
      - b. What kind of conflict might arise as they work together?
- Every talent brings considerable positives and advantages, but there are also flip sides to each. These are often referred to as “shadow sides” of talents. Similarly, each of us has some preconceived thoughts/feelings about certain strengths. Often these personal hangups can cause us to form negative opinions of others or of particular talents, which cause barriers to fully appreciating someone else’s talents.
  - Barrier Labels matching worksheet (separate document)
  - Barrier labels of personal talents (separate document)
    - Encourages students to see their own talents through a different lens
- Gaining a richer understanding of your talents
  - A lot of what we’ve been doing is to help you get a deeper sense of what these talents look like in your life, SO THAT you can learn to actually apply these abilities.
  - Important to distinguish between a TALENT and a STRENGTH
    - There is a very real difference between a “talent” and a “strength.” Simply put, a talent is your raw innate capacity for something; a strength is a refined ability that can be harnessed toward positive ends.
    - A couple of examples:

- Talent = ability to jump really high; Strength = ability to do trick basketball dunks
- Talent = pick up languages easily; Strength = ability to actually speak a particular language
- Having a “talent” alone does not necessarily mean that you will also possess a related “strength.” But a talent is a necessary foundation for a strength.
- In the 2 examples above, what would it take to turn the talent into the subsequent strength?
  - Encourage open discussion and ideas (ex. – taking a class, watching videos, Rosetta Stone, finding a mentor/coach, PRACTICE, vocabulary flashcards, living in a country that speaks that language, etc.)
- A TALENT comes a STRENGTH through INVESTMENT
  - $\text{Strength} = \text{Talent} \times (\text{Knowledge} + \text{Skill})$
- Think about something that you are reasonably good at. How did you get to where you are? What were the steps you took?
  - Strengths can be cultivated, but not without effort
  - Understanding your natural talents (building blocks) will help you better identify where your investment (knowledge, skill, practice) is likely to lead to the best results
- Planting a seed for final session
  - We will spend time in class thinking about leveraging your talents to help you face a specific challenge you have before you. Begin to think about a particular task or situation in your life that feels challenging or even daunting. You’ll spend time in our Week 10 class setting goals to help you take on your challenge!

## Session 5 – Spiritual Formation

- Fostering wholeness
- Exploring and wrestling with new perspectives
- Spiritual practices – distribute handouts and let students discuss in groups
  - Encourage you to consider seeking to incorporate practices and disciplines that cultivate attentiveness and intentionality
  - We can easily get overwhelmed by thoughts of “What *should* I be doing?” Instead, I want you to consider “What do I *want* to be doing?”
    - What activities, practices, or habits will allow you to rest and practice gratitude?
- Announcements

## Session 6 – Leveraging Talents & Course Wrap Up

- Opening question:
  - What one aspect of Homecoming have you been most excited about? (The event could have already happened this week or be still to come!)
- 2-minute reflection question:
  - In your time at Baylor so far, what is the most significant thing you have been learning about yourself?
  - Take 2 minutes to write and reflect, then each person share with the group.
- Wrapping up our time in U1000!
  - We have spent a lot of our time together this semester thinking and talking about your individual talents and strengths. Identifying, applying, and building on your strengths is a lifelong endeavor! Obviously there's no way we can condense all of that into a single 10-week window of your life! We have only scratched the surface...
  - But, at the same time, we have hopefully helped you think about yourself in some new ways. And as we wrap up our time together, I want us to think about small intentional steps you can take that help you leverage some of the strongest attributes about yourself.
  - Today we're going to focus on one specific "challenge" you are or will soon be facing, and what it could look like to intentionally apply your strengths.
- Activity:
  - a) What is one specific project/task/situation in front of you that feels challenging or even daunting?
  - b) What about it seems most daunting?
  - c) Identify one of your talents that you can directly leverage/apply in order to step into and meet the challenge.
  - d) Specify at least 3 strategies you can use to do so.
    - Share with a partner or with large group as time allows.
- **Post Test (be sure to allow 15 minutes at the end of class for this)**
- Any formal wrap up you would like to do with your class!