Promoting Academic Success through Resilience and Hardiness

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There is no doubt that life itself is ever-changing. In fact, we are changing from the minute we are conceived. Some of this is part of our natural maturation process – or the unfolding of developmental changes across our lifespan. Life events and situations can also force us to change and, at times, can be stressful. Researchers have identified characteristics related to our personality that indicate how well we adapt – or don't – to these changes. Studies on resiliency and hardiness (Bonnano, 2004; Maddi, 2002) have shown that those individuals high in resilience or hardiness are better equipped to handle this stress. Furthermore, some individuals have been shown to thrive under stressful circumstances.

College life includes academic, financial, and social demands which can place excessive stress on students. Some students may lack the coping or problem solving skills necessary to meet these new demands. Students who have a hard time coping may be at risk for academic failure and drop-out. According to Fentress & Collopy (2011), one contributing factor can be a low academic self-efficacy (i.e., their perceptions of their own academic ability). They found that higher dropout rates of first generation college students may be linked to low academic self-

efficacy, whereas high self-efficacy may be linked to high retention and resiliency. Maddi

(2002) also found that academic success was related to a construct he called hardiness.

Academic Performance

Research has found a relationship between academic success and hardiness (Sheard &

Golby, 2007), academic success and resiliency (Fentress & Collopy, 2011), and academic

success and other personality factors (Wagerman & Funder, 2007). Essentially, these studies

have identified two contributing factors: self-efficacy and personality.

If academic self-efficacy is low, this can inhibit student functioning because the student

may not feel "smart" enough to ask the right questions in class, may not feel that he or she

contributes enough to a study group, or may be reluctant to approach a professor for help. In

contrast, students who are high in self-efficacy may be better able to identify their shortcomings

and seek the appropriate help. It is believed that the latter student will be better off

academically.

Personality factors can interact with self-efficacy to affect academic performance.

Personality hardiness has emerged as one of those factors. Hardiness has been proposed as a

pathway to resilience (Bonnano, 2004; Maddi, 2002). Hardiness involves not only resilience

(maintaining your performance under stress) but includes thriving as well (i.e., using stressful

circumstances to motivate or enhance performance). Thus, hardiness can stimulate our problem

solving capabilities including seeking support from social or significant others.

Maddi also concluded that these hardiness skills could be learned at any point in life.

This may be an important point to consider. If educators acknowledge that some of the students

they interact with every day may lack the self-efficacy or the hardiness to successfully navigate college life, they may be able to offer the support and mentoring that these students need. Demonstrating problem-solving, providing supportive social interactions, and offering experiential feedback can help students learn hardy attitudes (Maddi, 2002).

Student Retention

Financial strain can be one factor that influences student retention. In addition to academic performance, it appears that the use of problem solving strategies can be helpful in reducing the stress of financial strain experiences by college students. Students can perceive financial strain in various ways. Those who experience recurrent monetary concerns may find themselves unable to focus on their schoolwork. Others, however, may see financial stress as a motivating factor and propel them to graduate earlier or seek an academic major that is more marketable.

It turns out that "social capital" is another factor that may play a role in student retention. Portes (1998) defined social capital as consisting of one's social network and the knowledge and access that network provides. Sources of social capital such as peers, technology-based resources, and families all provide different types of social capital. However, the students' personalities influenced the use of this social support.

One study found that feeling respected by faculty and staff was an important factor effecting student retention (Fentress & Collopy, 2011). Furthermore, access to information provided by resident assistant, peers, and technology-based resources (i.e., internet, campus-wide emails) were equally important, especially for non-traditional students. Personality

characteristics such as shyness and an insistence on doing everything oneself inhibited students'

access to this information.

Suggestions for Educators

The factors for student success and retention are varied and interact with each other.

Research suggests that as educators, we must be create academic environments that promote

resiliency and hardiness. This includes promoting caring and supportive relationships, providing

opportunities for participation, and offering access to technology-based resources and

knowledge. The following are some specific suggestions:

1. Faculty and staff need to make students aware of the structure of the university, available
   programs and sources of support. Professors can offer face-to-face, paper, and
   technology-based resources.

2. A peer or faculty mentoring program can provide individualized support and assistance.
   Mentors can offer strategies to teach self-efficacy and hardiness.

3. Universities can train faculty and staff to be aware of the many factors influencing
   student success and retention.

4. Teaching strategies can include promoting general problem solving skills that can
   increase student development of transferable skills outside of the classroom.

5. Encouraging students to demonstrate creative problem solving challenges students and
   can motivate them to seek out additional resources (Judkins et al., 2005).

6. Faculty can encourage open communication with students. This has been shown to increase student confidence.

7. Student commitment and dedication (which significantly predicts academic achievement) can be obtained by offering semester-long projects.

8. Semester-long projects can also help students embrace (rather than avoid) challenges and setbacks and can promote mastery over the subject matter.

9. Collaborative assignments can increase social behaviors. This has also been shown to increase student motivation (Sheard, 2009).

10. Team-building partnerships also help develop a sense of confidence and control over academic accomplishments and endeavors (Judkins et al. 2005).

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