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Increasing Undergraduate Student Retention with "Psychology of Success": A Course for First-Year Students on Academic Warning. *A Practice Report*

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Abstract

In an effort to improve student success and thus retention, the College of Arts & Sciences at a highly selective Mid-Atlantic private undergraduate university in the United States developed a for-credit course titled *Psychology of Success*. The course, grounded in positive psychology, adopts a strengths-based approach. Students who are on academic warning after their first semester are enrolled in the course, although not required to remain in the course. After four years of implementation, student outcomes for those who participated, across a variety of dimensions – including retention, persistence, and graduation –had better outcomes than those who did not participate. This practice report will share the philosophy, methodology, and implementation of the course as well as results from the first four years of implementation.

***Keywords**:* Retention; student success; persistence; graduation; first year experience.

Introduction

Increasing retention and graduation rates for all undergraduate students is important. In the United States, earning post-secondary degrees, and higher, is associated with increased economic, health, social mobility, and other societal benefits (Ma et al., 2019). Comparing income alone, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) report *Education Pays, 2021* uses "median usual weekly earnings" data and shows Bachelor degree holders earning approximately USD$2,000 more per month than high school diploma recipients and USD$1,600 more per month than people with "some college, no degree" (https://www.bls.gov/careeroutlook/2022/data-on-display/education-pays.htm). Therefore, it is important for institutions to do what they can to increase retention and graduation rates for all, and especially important for First-Generation (1st Gen), low income, and students of color (SOC) given that national data across United States colleges and universities consistently shows poorer retention and graduation rates for these groups (Ma et al., 2019).

Our bachelor degree awarding institution is a highly selective private, primarily undergraduate institution (PUI), primarily white institution (PWI), located in a rural area of a state in the Mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The undergraduate enrollment is 3,800 students with approximately 10% 1st Gen, 10% low income, 21% SOC, 52% female-identifying, and 20% participating in Division 1 athletics. The university is comprised of three colleges: a college of arts & sciences, a college of

engineering, and a college of management. Students in any college are expected to graduate in eight semesters (typically four years). The overall population average retention rate over the past four years is 92%, with a four-year graduation rate of 82% and 6-year graduation rate of 88%. When analyzed according to demographic identities, we observe Black/African American, Hispanic, and 1st Gen lagging behind with six-year graduation rates of 85%, 87%, and 85%, respectively (Bucknell FactBook, 2023). In comparison to US national averages, our university is well above the mean, but with disparate persistence and graduation rates there is clearly still work to be done for our most vulnerable populations.

In an effort to improve student success and retention in the College of Arts & Sciences, especially among these three groups, we developed a for-credit course titled *Psychology of Success* specifically for students on academic warning (<2.0 GPA) after their first semester. The first-year students in the College of Arts & Sciences constitute approximately 60% (~630 students) of the entering class each year. The number of students earning below 2.0 each fall (first) semester varies but recent numbers are approximately 25 (4%) students. This practice report will share the philosophy, methodology, and implementation of the course as well as results from the first four years of implementation.

Philosophy and Methodology of Course

The approach taken in this course is rooted in principles of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), and the emphasis on thriving advocated by Schreiner (2015). Given the focus on achieving success in college, the cornerstone of our course is to help students set academic and personal goals, develop action steps to achieve those goals, and engage in regular self-reflection about progress toward their goals. To support this process, our course takes a strengths-based approach in which we coach students to identify and develop personal strengths and to use and refine strategies that have worked for them in the past. As Schreiner (2015) points out, "spending most of one's time remediating weaknesses rarely energizes the student" (p. 7), which may be the reason that deficit remediation programs are often not effective (Attewell, 2006; Bettinger & Long, 2008; Calcagno & Long, 2008). In contrast, focusing on one's strengths is energizing, allowing students to be more "fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally in the college experience" (Schreiner, 2015, p. 8). We also focus on helping students to develop mindsets associated with greater persistence and more effective coping styles, including a growth mindset (Yeager & Dweck, 2020), and optimism (Kaiser, et al., 2020). Finally, recognizing that progress toward academic and personal goals is affected by the quality of one's self-care, the course explores self-care practices including sleep, exercise, time in nature, mindfulness meditation, and healthy leisure activities.

Course Structure

Our course meets once a week for 80 minutes. Prior to each class, students read relevant articles or chapters and write a reflection paper in which they apply the lessons in the readings to their own lives. During some weeks, students engage in a practice related to the topic we will discuss (e.g., daily writing about a best future self). Class time is interactive including direct teaching of concepts, small group exercises, personal reflection, and large group discussions. Classes begin with a check-in about successes and challenges in the preceding week and end with an opportunity for students to set goals and intentions related to the day's topic.

Students also meet every two weeks individually with the instructor. Prior to these meetings, they submit a self-reflection in which they discuss their successes of the prior two weeks, challenges they are facing, and personal strengths and strategies they can use to meet those challenges. The meetings begin with a discussion of the student's successes in which the instructor amplifies the success and encourages a sense of pride. In discussing challenges, the instructor helps the student develop goals and action plans to address their challenges. These meetings also provide the opportunity for the instructor to reinforce positive mindsets and healthy self-care practices.

Course Topics

Goals and Action Plans

Perhaps the most impactful component of the class is helping students to develop good habits around school work and personal care. For example, the second class of the semester is devoted to the importance of using their time effectively and efficiently. Applying the framework developed by Strickland (2017), students develop a detailed weekly calendar (including class times, regular meetings, study times, and self-care activities) and a semester calendar (including exams, due dates for projects and papers, and special events). At first, students resist this level of planning but as the semester progresses, students become adept at revising their schedules to best meet their needs and often report how well their detailed calendars support their academic work and self-care. Throughout the semester, students set and revise academic and personal goals, and develop action steps to meet these goals. Early in the semester, students generate goals and evaluate them in terms of how well they align with their values, how intrinsically rewarding they are, whether the goals are harmonious with each other, and whether they are oriented

toward mastery (Lyubomirsky, 2017). Students also practice how to break their goals down into concrete action plans and set implementation intentions to counter negative temptations.

Developing Strengths

Another major component of our course helps students to identify and develop personal strengths and practice effective strategies. Prior to the first class, students complete an exercise adapted from Park and Peterson (2009) in which they reflect on and write about all of the things that went well in their first semester both academically and non-academically as well as a time during their first semester when they were at their best. These reflections form the basis of their self-introductions during the first class. Later in the semester, students take the Values in Action survey developed by Peterson and Seligman (VIA Institute, 2023) to identify their top character strengths and observe how they use the strengths over the course of a week. When this topic is discussed in class, students identify and discuss in small groups ways they can use their character strengths to meet their academic and personal goals.

Positive Mindsets

Additionally, several assignments and classes prompt students to reflect on the mindsets they bring to course work and other aspects of their lives, and to develop mindsets that support their goals. For example, students learn about neuroplasticity and growth mindset, and are encouraged to use growth mindset strategies such as attributing performance to effort, interpreting struggle as a sign they are learning, and seeking help. Students also explore the advantages of developing an optimistic mindset. This topic is introduced with "the best college self" assignment, modeled on the work of King (2001) and shown to increase optimism across several studies (Carrillo, et al., 2019). In this assignment, students free-write for 15 minutes for five consecutive days to the prompt that instructs them to imagine themselves at their college graduation looking back over their college years with pride that they have clarified their priorities, worked hard, and succeeded at accomplishing all that is important to them.

Self-Care

Several classes or segments of classes are devoted to exploring personal practices and habits that support success. Students learn about some of the science demonstrating the importance of sleep, exercise, and time in nature in regulating bodily functions and promoting psychological well-being and are encouraged to set goals and action plans to establish good habits in these and other domains. We also consider how the use of alcohol and marijuana affects students' personal and academic lives, and the importance of making mindful choices about their own substance use. Students also learn about and practice mindfulness. Practicing mindfulness through meditation is introduced in one class and then over the course of the next week, students read several short chapters of *The Mindful Twenty Something* (Rogers, 2016) and commit to a 10-minute daily meditation practice. After reflecting on their week-long experience and discussing the benefits in class, many students commit to continuing a regular practice. To help support their ongoing mindfulness practice, we incorporate meditation into most classes.

Celebration

We weave celebration throughout the course. Each class begins with students identifying something from the past week that they feel proud about (i.e., their successes). As students share their successes, classmates and the instructor provide appreciative feedback to enhance feelings of pride. Individual meetings with the instructor always begin with what has gone well in the past few weeks, which provides another important opportunity to celebrate student success, and the final class of the semester is a celebration of students' growth throughout the semester. The students' final paper asks them to reflect on the progress they made over the semester, challenges they still face, and how they will use what they learned in the course to meet these challenges. One student writes:

> from the start of the semester to the end of the semester, my whole way of thinking and style of learning has completely changed. This class has helped me in so many ways to succeed not only in getting my work done in a timely manner, but also to better prepare myself for the type of attitude I need later in life.

Implementation and Impact of Initiative

Our philosophy for the implementation of the credit-bearing course held firm to the notion that students should not be forced to participate, and they should view this course as an opportunity. It should be noted that at our institution, there is a flat tuition fee and since this was a partial credit course it could be taken in addition to the students' other regularly scheduled courses without an additional fee. For the first two years of implementation, depending on various factors such as credits earned, GPA, and engagement in their own learning to date, students were divided into three categories: 1) given the choice of being suspended for a semester or enroll in the course as they continue their studies, 2) automatically enrolled in the course but may

opt-out, or 3) invited to participate but would need to opt-in. After assessment in the first two years, we changed the process to automatically enrolling all students on academic warning and allowing the option to opt out by choosing to drop the course without consequences. After the first year with positive results, this course and its results were highlighted in students' end of term letters from their academic associate dean, which is also copied to the students' advisers and athletic coaches.

Participants

Over the four years, this resulted in 107 students eligible to participate in this course, with 71 students choosing to complete the course and 36 choosing not to (13 of which were from the first year alone). Overall, 58% of those who participated (Cohort A) identified as a SOC, 1st Gen, and/or low income. Similarly, about 56% who chose not to participate (Cohort B) were of these same identities.

Results

After four cohorts, measuring retention, persistence, and graduation rates, students who participated in the course showed better outcomes than those who did not participate.

The retention rate, which is defined to be the percentage of students who return for the fall semester of their second year, saw no difference between the two cohorts. Over the first four years, approximately 88% of the students who were in academic warning after the first semester continued enrollment at the university into their second year, which does lag behind the overall retention rate for the university at 92%.

The persistence rates, defined as the percentage of students enrolled beyond the first year and into future semesters, does show differences between Cohort A (those who participated in the course) and Cohort B (those who did not participate in the course). Included in Figure 1 is the first cohort of students (Class of 2022) who graduated in May 2022. Figure 2 shows the analysis to date of the first four cohorts of students. What is obvious is that the percentage of students in Cohort A consistently persisted at a higher rate than that of Cohort B. While the lack of persistence could be due to a variety of reasons, poor performance in this group of students is often the leading cause for eventually withdrawing.

Figure 1

Number of Students who Persist Through Graduation from Class of 2022 in Each Cohort

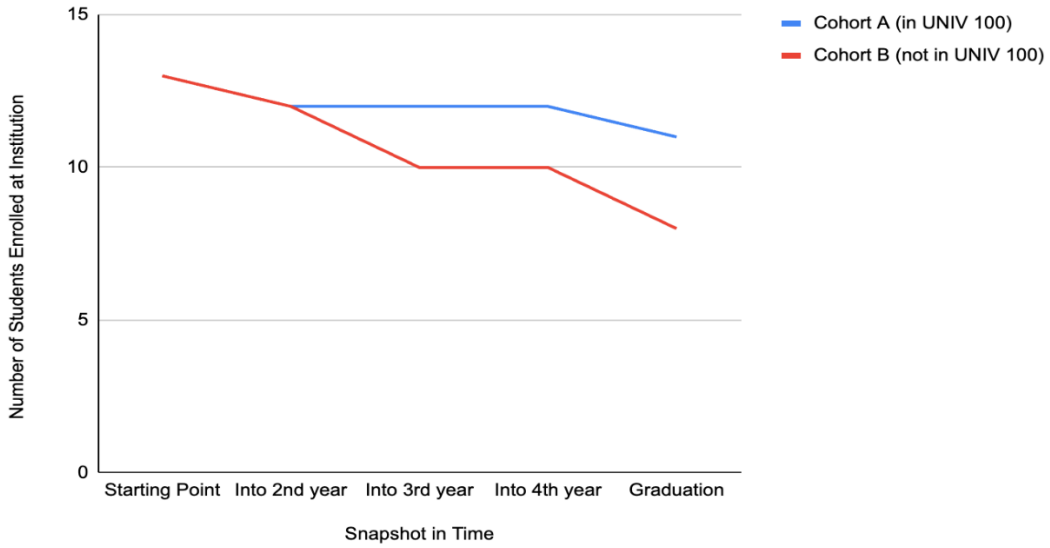
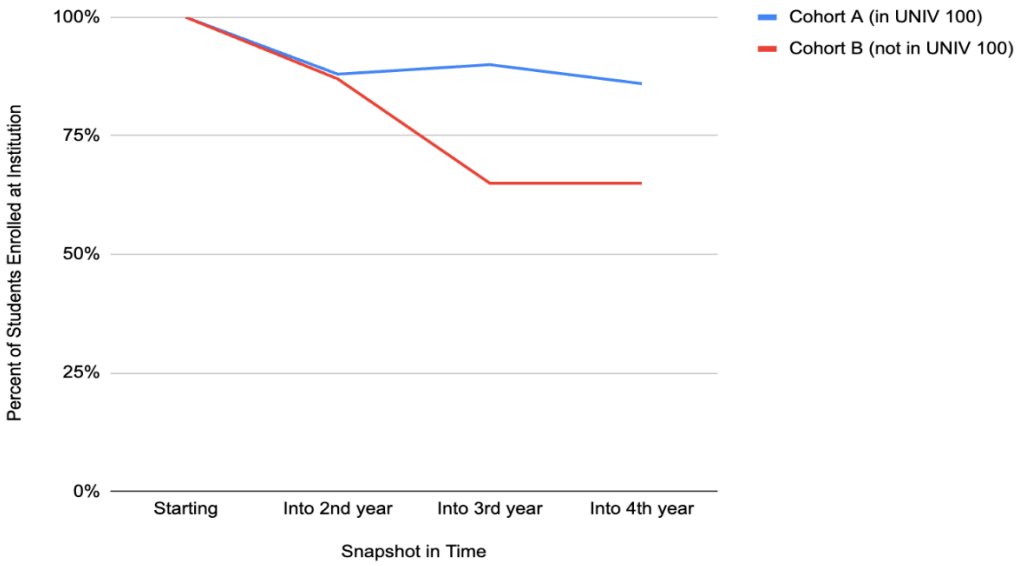


Figure 2

Percentage of Students From the First Four Years in Each Cohort



Spring 2022 marked the 8th semester for the Class of 2022 and the first cohort of students offered the opportunity to participate in the *Psychology of Success* (UNIV 100) course. This first cohort included 26 students, who evenly divided themselves into 13 students who participated (Cohort A) and 13 who did not (Cohort B). Of the original 13 students in Cohort A, 11 graduated in 8 semesters (85%) compared to 8 who graduated from Cohort B (62%). Cohort A included more SOC (6 vs. 4), more 1st Gen (3 vs. 0), and more low income (6 vs. 0) students. The results are especially impressive given the disproportionate number of students in Cohort A from populations who generally have a lower graduation rate.

Concluding Discussion

The results indicate that we have a promising course and intervention for students. The College plans to continue offering this course and also developing a similarly focused course for students returning from a leave of absence. We have the eventual goal of offering this to all students in their first semester of their first year at our institution.

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