

# The Fairfax Learning Excursion to the Strengths in Education Conference

February 8, 2012

## *The Impact of Strengths on Hope and Wellbeing*

February 8, 2012 dawned bright and sunny, it was the morning that Tanya Craven, Julie Wechsler, Denise Logvin and Scott Geddis left Phoenix, AZ to attend Gallup's "Strengths in Education Conference; the Impact of Strengths on Hope and Wellbeing" in Fairfax, VA. Our reasons for attending the conference were many but each of us wanted to learn if a Strengths-based education really can increase hope and wellbeing and more importantly, can a Strengths-based education increase student and employee engagement, retention, and wellbeing at South Mountain Community College (SMCC).

Gallup's reputation for improving educational standards is known around the world so it was no surprise that Gallup was a conference sponsor. The article "*Take a Look at the Students*", co-written by Marguerite Kondracke and Gallup Chairman and CEO, Jim Clifton (author of the book "The Next Generation of Leadership") <http://gmj.gallup.com/content/124079/next-generation-leadership.aspx>, shows how Gallup's research not only identifies and analyzes educational trends but provides the resources and leadership needed to create innovative educational models and practices that can make a difference; "Today, America is the only industrialized nation in the world where children are less likely to graduate from high school than their parents. A student drops out of high school every 26 seconds, 1.2 million children each year. Three in 10 students fail to graduate with their class, a percentage that doubles for minority, urban and low-income students.

<http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2009/jul/19/take-a-look-at-the-students/>

## *About Hope*

Can a Strengths-based education help prevent student stop-outs? Gallup research shows it can, why? Research shows that a Strengths-based education can create hope; hope is more than a happy feeling or "positive thinking," according to research conducted by Dr. C. Richard Snyder (<http://c.r.snyder.socialpsychology.org/>). The "hope" of "Hope Theory" can be defined as "the

perceived capacity to produce pathways to desired goals (pathways thinking), along with the motivation to begin and continue the use of those pathways (agency thinking)

[https://www.novapublishers.com/catalog/product\\_info.php?products\\_id=1504](https://www.novapublishers.com/catalog/product_info.php?products_id=1504). Hope (pathways thinking) is what helps us persevere and keep our eyes on our goals even when we feel like giving up. Hope teaches, “when one door shuts, another door opens-look for the open door” (agency thinking), having hope helps us continue onward, around, and sometimes through, obstacles.

### ***About Strengths and Wellbeing***

Since hope can increase student retention and persistence, what role does Strengths education have in hope and wellbeing? Strengths education impacts hope and wellbeing in several ways. First, knowing your Strengths means knowing you have the ability to be your best every day, Strengths knowledge *increases* hope. Secondly, believing in your Strengths doesn't let us elevate our weaknesses, now, instead of believing what we can't do, believing in our Strengths lets us see all the incredible things we can do.

Finally, knowing and believing in our Strengths lets us live our Strengths, living our Strengths means using pathways and agency thinking to plan, create, and achieve goals in every important area of life whether they are: career, social, financial, physical, or social. A Strengths-based education is the foundation for increased hope and wellbeing. When we arrived in Fairfax, Virginia we were still excited about attending the Strengths in Education Conference and what we would learn.

<http://www.gallup.com/consulting/126584/Wellbeing.aspx>.

The Strengths in Education Conference *the Impact of Strengths on Hope and Wellbeing* was being held at the George Mason Inn on the campus of George Mason University. Dr. Shari Olson met us in the airport and we slowly made our way to the George Mason Inn through late “rush-hour” traffic. Later, our group grew by one when Mark Nielsen met us in the hotel lobby. That night we met for dinner and shared StrengthsQuest experiences and stories; discussed the next day's activities and the sessions we planned to attend. We all planned to attend the session “Introducing Strengths and Wellbeing to a College Community” since SMCC's own Julie Wechsler and StrengthsQuest facilitator Scott Geddis were presenting a session called “Introducing Strengths and Wellbeing to a College Community”; knowing that SMCC's Strengths initiatives would soon be put on the world's stage (well, the internet anyway), was awe-inspiring.



The conference started early the next morning; not only did we learn about Strengths, hope, and wellbeing; we had the opportunity to speak with and listen to educators from universities and colleges across the nation. Many of the conference attendees had implemented a Strengths-based education and testified that levels of student retention, persistence, and engagement increased after they began StrengthsQuest on their campuses. For many of us, the conference keynote address presented by Shane Lopez Ph. D was especially meaningful, and we tried to memorize Dr. Lopez's every word.

After the sessions ended, that night we met again and shared what we'd learned, we shared our amazement and appreciation that the great things that had happened at other colleges could happen at South Mountain Community College (SMCC). We each knew that SMCC could become a college focused on our Strengths and not our weaknesses; we believed it for our students and our community. We believed that SMCC can become a campus where Strengths, hope, and wellbeing doesn't just grow but flourishes. We believe that creating a campus of Strengths, hope, and wellbeing has the power to change lives-we believe it for our students, our community, and for ourselves. As we talked to each other, we realized talking about what could be wasn't enough; we needed to walk these ideas out. So, after donning sweaters and jackets against the crisp night air, we left the hotel's warmth and started walking. We walked following the path before us, we walked around unfamiliar buildings; past parking lots, and across busy intersections; we walked, not always sure where we were but knowing we were going in the right direction. We kept on walking and talking together until at last we saw the glow of the hotel's lobby shining against the night sky; we walked to the hotel's door together, proud of the journey we'd made.

When we got back to Phoenix we wrote down our thoughts and observations of the sessions and the Keynote address from the “Strengths in Education Conference *the Impact of Strengths on Hope and Wellbeing.*” The notes and a link to the Power Point slides created by the presenters are in the attachment.

Now that you’ve read this report, this is your invitation to join the discussion, to add your voice; share your vision and belief; to walk together to make South Mountain Community College a campus of Strength, Hope, and Wellbeing for our students, our community and for ourselves.

### ***The Keynote Address***

The conference Keynote address was presented by Shane J. Lopez, Ph. D, Research Director, Clifton Strengths School and Senior Scientist, Gallup. Dr. Lopez is a recognized leader in the field of “Hope Theory” his speech was entitled, “How We Hope.”

Dr. Lopez began by saying that “hopeful leaders assess the future and figure out how to make it better.” According to Dr. Lopez, Gallup research showed that “85% of people surveyed believe the future will be better but don’t believe they have the power to make it so” and, “a better future for our students, our college, our state, our country, is possible and attainable but it can’t happen-it won’t happen until hopeful leaders find a way to create, teach, and model hope to our students and employees and then teach them to do the same.”

### ***What Students Want:***

Dr. Lopez said that on one survey measuring student motivators for attending college the top two reasons students attend college were to get:

1. A good Job
2. A Happy Family

“Educators” said Dr. Lopez, “believe students attend college and are motivated by getting good grades and a college degree but what college students want is a good job and a happy family-not good scores and graduation.”

“How can educators help students connect what students want with the way to achieve what they want?” asked Dr. Lopez, “By helping them create pathways to the future (pathways thinking)-then

once they have the goal and the pathway help them create alternate plans in case their primary plan fails (agency thinking).” “Students have one plan” he said, “then, when an obstacle comes most students don’t have a Plan B; the majority of our students don’t know how to develop alternative plans- we never taught students to have alternative plans. Having alternatives plans sponsors hope that they can have the future they want.’

Educators must build hope in students, “Because Hope” said Dr. Lopez, “matters.” “Hope explains why some students drop out and other students continue their education: hope is what helps students show up, produce effort, sustain productivity, and leads to increased health, wellbeing, and longevity. Hope and engagement explains student stop-outs. Delayed gratification can help in the future and can cause positive outcomes now-what is the vivid image that you have to get what you want 6 months, 3 years, 5 years from now? We have to create vivid images of the future. The future pulls you forward-where there’s a *way* there’s a *will*. Motivation can be put on autopilot so that every decision made today affects tomorrow’s outcomes. Enrolling in spring and fall concurrently-creates a vivid image to help retain students.”

How can educators help build hope in students? We must first see the problem; then act to change it. Dr. Lopez identified two things educators must do to help students create actionable plans for the future and suggested some internet sites that help students keep a future focus:

1. **“Teach students how to live in the future”** by creating opportunities for students that are “Future-Focused.”
2. **Help students create Multiple options** “To help retain students” said Dr. Lopez,” create vivid images of the future because the future pulls you forward. Teach students how to plan for “ifs” when you don’t have hope borrow hope- [challengepost.com](http://challengepost.com)- you post what you need and say I’ll pay x amount of dollars, I need ideas and people all over the world will work on the problem to win the money.”

Dr. Lopez shared these additional ideas to help students focus on the future.

- Future casting-(preview the future), get students to live in the future of the job/internships, - [stickk.com](http://stickk.com) (students can type in future goals).

- Setting action triggers (craft when/where plans). Futureme.org-create a “when/where” plan for creating an action plan for assignments.
- “If you give an assignment ask -when will you start? Where will you be? What will you bring? Create clues to remind yourself/motivate yourself-you can send yourself an email of what you need to do in the future.”

“We don’t have time to waste”, admonished Dr. Lopez, ***“Act With Urgency- Create Hope and Wellbeing!”***

Dr. Lopez concluded the lecture with a quote from John F. Kennedy, “We must think and act not only for the moment but for our time.”(For more information on Shane Lopez Ph. D, see: <http://www.gallup.com/corporate/21925/shane-lopez-phd.aspx>). To read more about Dr. Lopez and Hope Theory see: <http://www.futureeducators.org/goteach/2011/08/09/making-ripples-of-hope/>