

# Preface

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Higher education is at a critical juncture. Faced with unprecedented economic hardships, increased demands for accountability, and challenges from students, families, and the public to demonstrate the value of a college education, we must find new ways of helping students succeed not only in college, but in life. The tremendous strides that have been made in access to college have not translated to equivalent rates of success, as fewer than half of college students who begin a bachelor's degree ever complete one in their lifetime (Aud et al., 2010). Disparities in graduation rates, academic success, and psychological well-being across ethnic groups on campus (Hennessy, 2010) underscore that our traditional approaches to helping students succeed are not working—at least not for all students.

Even traditional perspectives that encapsulate student success in strong grades and degree attainment are open to question, as researchers are beginning to realize that the college experience includes more than the classroom and commencement (Kuh, Kinzie, Shuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005). Engaging fully in that experience and benefiting most meaningfully from a college education involves potentially life-changing decisions, relationships, emotional reactions, social interactions, and psychological responses that transcend the behaviors we measure as GPA and graduation rates.

The construct of *thriving* as an expanded vision of student success provides a framework for conceptualizing new ways of helping students reap the full benefits of higher education. The very word thriving implies that success involves more than surviving a four-year academic obstacle course. Students who thrive are vitally engaged in the college endeavor—intellectually, socially, and emotionally. They experience what Tagg (2003) calls *deep learning*; they are investing effort within the classroom and managing their lives well beyond it. Thriving students are also goal oriented, applying their strengths to address

the academic challenges they face. When they are thriving, students are connected to others in healthy and meaningful ways, and they desire to make a difference in the world around them. They also see the world differently. Equipped with a positive perspective on life, they are secure in the present and confident of the future.

Thriving is not a personality trait. Because it is comprised of psychosocial characteristics that are changeable within a person, interventions and environmental situations can make a difference. Thriving students are those who are able to experience life's transitions as opportunities that lead to significant personal growth. Yet, they rarely do so without support. Thriving students are typically surrounded by others who are thriving, and are often embedded in a community that provides them with a sense of belonging and competence. The very nature of college demands the successful navigation of a series of changes; thus, the focus of this book is on thriving in transitions.

The purpose of this book is to provide higher education faculty, staff, and administrators with both a deeper understanding of the nature of the transitions that students typically experience and a roadmap for helping them thrive during those transitions and ultimately succeed in life. As a result, each chapter outlines the research about students experiencing a specific type of transition, offering empirical evidence for what contributes to thriving during that period, and also includes practical suggestions for how educators can assist students so they remain fully engaged during difficult times of change.

Because the concept of thriving is a departure from the behaviorally oriented theories that populate the current student success literature, the book opens with an introduction by Jillian Kinzie, who places the student success theories in historical and theoretical context as a foundation for the exploration of thriving. The first two chapters then provide the framework for the book. In chapter 1, Schreiner describes the nature of successful transitions and outlines how the construct of thriving was developed and measured, as well as how it provides a helpful perspective for navigating transitions. In chapter 2, Louis and Schreiner highlight strengths development as the vehicle for helping students thrive in college. They include concrete descriptions of how integrating such a perspective might inform advisors, educators in the classroom, and student affairs professionals. As with each chapter in the book, the authors' focus is on practical strategies that can be implemented on a variety of campuses.

The remainder of the book highlights the successive transitions that students experience while in college. A chapter on the first-year experience by Nelson

and Vetter delineates the hurdles students experience as they transition from high school to college, as well as the structures that institutions could put into place to support students during that transition. Paredes-Collins' chapter on students of color highlights the daily transitions that such students experience as they navigate a predominantly White campus. Sriram and Vetter continue the theme of continual transitions as they explore the experiences of high-risk students and what helped them succeed.

Sophomores receive particular attention from Schreiner, Slavin Miller, Pullins, and Seppelt in chapter 6, as the authors use the results of a national study of thousands of sophomores as the basis for their recommendations on how advising, student-faculty interaction, spirituality, and creating a sense of community in the classroom can foster thriving in the sophomore year. Transfer students and their ability to navigate a new institutional system are the focus of quantitative research in chapter 7 by McIntosh and Nelson, followed by Louis and Hulme's chapter describing an extensive qualitative study of high-achieving seniors who were followed into the year after graduation for insights on how such students were able to thrive as they moved from college into life.

The book concludes with a chapter by the editors that synthesizes all the recommendations from each chapter into a roadmap for educators. Recommendations are grouped into three main areas: academic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal thriving. The chapter ends with campuswide recommendations for establishing a culture that is conducive to this holistic vision of student success.

Throughout the book, our purpose is to balance empirical evidence about a wide variety of college-related transitions with practical suggestions for institutions as they help students address the challenges that accompany periods of change. For educational access to translate to student success, the rigorous inquiry described in this volume must be coupled with our best creative thinking to craft targeted solutions that equip all students to succeed. To that end, perhaps the most important principle we offer is that colleges and universities have both the power and the responsibility to help every student thrive.

## References

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