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Where To Start? Asset-Based Approaches For Practitioners In Higher Education

Robert Drago & Michelle Setnikar

Deficit thinking centers an individual's background or identities as the reason a student struggles or faces challenges in college. Higher education practitioners have a drive to shift policy, programs, and perspectives away from the harmful influence of deficit thinking. Asset-based approaches, such as psychologically attuned communication and growth mindset messaging, instead focus on student experiences and backgrounds as an opportunity rather than a burden. The question before practitioners is: where to start? We present options to consider.

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Where To Start? Asset-Based Approaches For Practitioners In Higher Education

The lived experiences of a practitioner in higher education informs their approach to educational opportunities and administration. Whether an individual is consciously aware or not, their approach is likely also informed by the lived experiences of previous practitioners and historical precedent at any given institution of higher education. In this context, deficit thinking (also known as a deficit perspective, deficit model, or a deficit frame) has the potential to widely permeate policy, practice, pedagogy, and curriculum on college campuses (Aikman et al., 2003). Deficit thinking has many forms and definitions that ultimately center the “deficiencies” of an individual while disregarding outside influences that may contribute to challenges (Patton Davis & Museus, 2019, p. 122). In an educational setting, deficit thinking presents “lack of school success as being due to problems in students, their families, their culture, or their communities” (Weiner, 2003, p. 305). Deficit thinking can have a harmful influence on administrators and educators by placing blame or fault on a student’s background when they are not reaching certain standards or metrics (Yosso, 2005). The “deficiencies” often identified in practice suggest that a student’s identities (e.g., race, gender, etc.) are the basis of their struggles (Aikman et al., 2003). This problematic perspective identified throughout research and literature prompts many administrators and educators to seek alternatives to deficit thinking.

Where deficit thinking often disregards or inappropriately acknowledges the context of a student’s lived experience (Weiner, 2003), alternative approaches to educational activities will require administrators and educators to reflect on their intentions, perspectives, and goals in practice. Active efforts to reframe “behavior as if it *might not* be caused by a deficit” leads educators to “expand the students’ and their own possibilities” (Weiner, 2003, p. 311). This call to action has been addressed in higher education research and literature in the form of publications that identify and rightfully critique deficit thinking in policies, practice, pedagogy, and curriculum. Counter-storytelling is a valuable tool in research design and a framework to challenge a deficit perspective in methodology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Yosso (2005) conceptualizes an enriching classroom experience for students when educators seek to “analyze and challenge the impact of race and racism in U.S. society” (p. 70) and focus on the “cultural knowledge, skills, abilities, and contacts” (p. 69) of students. These approaches lay a vital and strong foundation, and we hope to present asset-based alternatives to deficit thinking applicable to additional opportunities beyond research and classroom management. We present two actionable opportunities for practitioners seeking replacements for deficit thinking in their day-to-day work.

Asset-Based Approaches

It seems clear that a shift to asset-based approaches will benefit students, and especially the most minoritized students, given the pervasive influence of deficit thinking on college campuses. Deficit approaches are often embedded within policies and practices that are challenging to overhaul with limited resources, time, staffing, and support, making it difficult to figure out where to start.

Despite these challenges, we posit there are actions within our control to minimize deficit thinking. Namely, our suggestion is to start by considering the messages we send to students. Do the institutional messages students receive give them the sense that their strengths are seen and valued, or do they allow students to wonder if they belong, if their missteps define them, or if they are unimportant? What we say matters, and changes in phrasing and language can have a significant impact. Higher education administrators and educators seeking an asset-based framework for their work can find creative opportunities within psychologically attuned communication research and growth mindset literature.

Psychologically Attuned Communication

Messages and communications sent to students from colleges and universities can feel impersonal and bureaucratic, even when crafted with a well-meaning intention to be informative and helpful. This is especially true when communicating difficult news, like when students are placed on academic probation. This experience has been the focus of research conducted by Dr. Shannon Brady and colleagues at the College Transition Collaborative (2021).

In their study of academic standing, Brady et al. (2021) discovered that students who were on probation or who had previously experienced probation reported high levels of negative emotion (e.g., shame, guilt, embarrassment, etc.), stress, and concerns about belonging. A stand-out in the students' description of their experience on probation was the impact of the notification letter. When the research team compared the intended message of administrators with the students' experience of the message, they discovered a mismatch: administrators intend to notify students of the academic standard, connect them with resources, and express care and concern, but students report feeling unsupported and punished. "Typical notification letters allow students to worry, 'Am I viewed negatively by my school?' and 'Does probation mean I don't belong, or I can't succeed?'" (Brady et al., 2021, para. 7). These worries discouraged students from taking positive action and impeded their academic recovery. Based on this information, Brady et al. (2021) devoted their research to developing an approach to writing "psychologically attuned" probation notification letters that would both clearly convey the institution's academic standards and policies while also addressing the psychological questions on students' minds about belonging and worth (para. 9).

The term psychological attunement is often used to describe the ways that a parent communicates to an infant that they can understand and share the infant's feelings. Expanded out, this approach involves being aware of the impact of something (e.g., an intervention, message, interaction, etc.) and attempting to address predictable psychological effects (Waltenbury et al., 2018). Brady et al. (2021) found that applying this approach to academic probation notification letters reduced shame and increased the likelihood that students would engage in positive behaviors. Their research uncovered these core principles for psychologically attuned notification letters (Waltenbury et al., 2018):

- Frame probation as a process, not a label.
- Communicate that it is not uncommon to experience difficulties in college.
- Acknowledge a variety of non-pejorative reasons for academic difficulties.
- Convey hope for returning to good standing.
- Provide clear information about performance standards, academic standing policy, probation process, and resources.

When these core principles are clearly conveyed in the notification letter, they directly address the psychological concerns of students and represent the school as understanding and approachable (Brady et al., 2021). Brady & the College Transition Collaborative [CTC] (2021) caution that psychologically attuned letters are not a “magic bullet,” but a complement to quality advising, teaching, and other support services (Part 1). Communicating with students in a psychologically attuned way allows for a higher return on the investments we are already making in supporting students.

Brady & the CTC (2021) also discovered that providing students with context is key and including a selection of student stories is a crucial aspect of attuned letters’ effectiveness. Testimonials provide students with a model for how to think about and engage in the probation process. Asking students about their experiences can reveal opportunities to build upon the assets and strengths that students already possess. In this way, psychologically attuned communication becomes iterative: we listen to students’ perspectives and experiences, we use what we learn to create attuned communication, we check in with students, and adapt our messages as we learn more.

The impact of psychological attunement is being studied and applied beyond academic standing notification letters. “The Student Experience Project (SEP) is a collaborative of university leaders, faculty, researchers and national education organizations committed to innovative, research-based practices to increase degree attainment by building equitable learning environments and fostering a sense of belonging on campus” (“Our Work,” n.d.). There are numerous research-based examples from the SEP Resource Hub that highlight the important impact psychologically attuned messages can have on the student experience and academic outcomes, especially for students with minoritized identities. Examples include (“SEP Resource Hub,” n.d.):

- A course syllabus that normalizes the experience of learning challenges, encourages students to connect with resources, and includes student stories of overcoming learning challenges.
- Feedback on an assignment that recognizes the assignment difficulty, offers specific opportunities to improve, and communicates expectation of improvement.
- An email response from an academic advisor that clarifies an academic policy, normalizes confusion, and offers to strategize a plan together.

Psychologically attuned communications allow higher education institutions to convey to students an assumption that they have inherent strengths to build on, that support and assistance are available to complement their efforts, and that there is both hope and expectation for a positive

outcome. Considering the impact of communication, and how it will be experienced by students, presents a great opportunity to shift from a deficit perspective to an asset perspective.

Growth Mindset Messaging

Carol Dweck (2006), a prominent author and psychologist, describes the influence of mindset on day-to-day experience found across age groups, including traditional college aged students in their lives inside and outside the classroom. Dweck (2006) uses the terms growth mindset and fixed mindset to describe perspectives and approaches found in her research of children, college students, professionals, executives, and high profile individuals. Individuals with the fixed mindset view life through a frame of winners and losers in a world where you either have talent or you do not. The fixed mindset may influence decisions of an individual, and can also take shape in an organizational culture that values accomplishments at the expense of development. Alternatively, the growth mindset is rooted in cultivating personal qualities “through efforts, strategies, and help from others” (Dweck, 2006, p. 13). Many higher education and student affairs professionals may be familiar with teaching or coaching students on the basic concepts of the growth mindset. Beyond teaching the growth mindset in academic or employment settings, there are endless opportunities for administrators and educators who value “confronting a challenge and making progress” to tap into growth mindset concepts in their work (Dweck, 2006, p. 29).

Higher education and student affairs practitioners drawn to an asset-based approach may resonate with the desire to have students “turn failure into a gift” (Dweck, 2006, p. 10). Infusing practice with growth mindset principles can help students do just that. Literature demonstrates a positive association between students with the growth mindset and student motivation, persistence, and learning (Kyte et al., 2020).

Dweck (2006) offers numerous examples to illustrate the positive influence of the growth mindset in education. Her research often observes the relationship between students' decisions or actions compared to assessment results used to determine the students' mindset (fixed or growth). Examples include (Dweck, 2006):

- English language learners with the growth mindset were more likely to enroll in a supplemental English course than those with the fixed mindset;
- Pre-med students with the growth mindset taking chemistry thrived when confronted with a challenge, versus those with the fixed mindset who struggled when faced with a challenge;
- Graduate business students with the growth mindset generated higher productivity in a furniture company business simulation compared to their peers with the fixed mindset;
- Evidence that the growth mindset can interrupt feelings of imposter syndrome or stereotype bias that may be experienced by college students.

Findings across various contexts demonstrate that a student's mindset influences their performance in higher education. While higher education and student affairs practitioners cannot control students in our environment (nor should we), we do have control over our messaging about processes, policies, and practice overall. It is crucial that administrators and educators recognize the influence we can have in the ways we communicate about learning and ability.

Growth mindset micro-messaging is a term utilized by Kyte et al. (2020) to describe communication sent by advisors to students with the goal of reframing challenges as opportunities for growth. Sample messaging was designed to emphasize the “universality of challenges,” “strategies,” and “help-seeking” for success (Kyte et al., 2020, p. 39). The phrases used in this sample message mirror the core pillars of the growth mindset. Focus group feedback from undergraduate students of this sample message “found strong evidence for a more positive interpretation by students as well as a greater likelihood of taking action” when presented with the growth mindset message compared to other sample messages designed with an appreciative advising perspective (Kyte et al., 2020, p. 42). Kyte et al. (2020) call for further exploration of any observable influence of growth mindset messaging on student behavior or outcomes. Messaging from administrators and educators can serve as meaningful checkpoints along a student's journey when faced with challenge, difficulty, or failure. Messaging designed to promote the growth mindset can interrupt students from defining failures as central to their identity—“I failed” vs. “I am a failure” (Dweck, 2006, p. 36). Therefore, infusing growth mindset into our messaging will require emphasis on three pillars: efforts, strategies, and help from others.

When our messaging encourages students to put in attention, time, care, and energy we can highlight the value of effort in college and reinforce a growth mindset. For instance, instructors can directly acknowledge a student's individual effort in a course they are struggling in, or praise that student for continuing to come to class and continuing to take the coursework seriously. Opportunities for students to develop effective strategies are found in a range of contexts, many of which are well established in higher education. We can adapt our messaging to remind students there are campus professionals who can strategize with them, and making these strategizing sessions available and hopeful are essential. For example, advisors can offer an opportunity to strategize a graduate school application timeline with students, while peer mentors can offer an opportunity to strategize time management methods with students. Finally, messaging that normalizes help-seeking can foster a growth mindset. Even before a student encounters a struggle and finds themselves in need of support, we can highlight the services and benefits of campus resources and engage students who would otherwise see no value in that resource. First-year seminar instructors, residential staff, and other higher education professionals can encourage students to take advantage of resources on campus before, during, and after they experience a struggle. This approach has the potential to remove negative social connotations of certain services among college students (i.e., mental health counseling). Teaching Assistants can promote regularly reviewing course material or exams with a professor or TA as a

constructive practice for students regardless of their performance in the course, just as regular counseling or therapy can be beneficial to all individuals on a college campus navigating the many complexities of society. The opportunities to apply growth mindset messaging in communication with college students are endless.

Next steps

Many higher education and student affairs professionals will agree that effort, strategy, and seeking help from others are valuable for students' growth and development. However, we must ask ourselves if we are adequately conveying those values in our messaging to students. When educators want to move from intent to action they will “reject the deficit paradigm to explain school failure, they open the door to other explanations, reasons that place responsibility in the teachers and school’s hands” (Weiner, 2003, p. 310). Administrators and educators can make meaningful changes to emails, notifications, phone scripts, appointment agendas, performance evaluations, and more by using psychologically attuned principles and by infusing the pillars of the growth mindset into their messaging. Brady & the CTC (2021) remind us that “our positive and helpful intentions do not always come across to students” (Part 3) and Dweck (2006) argues that “with the right mindset and the right teaching, people are capable of a lot more than we think” (p. 64). Messaging that demonstrates “talents can be developed” may be a bridge between theory and practice for administrators and educators who wish for students to “fulfill their potential” (Dweck, 2006, p. 50).

Deficit thinking “fuels a wide array of negative consequences” for students in higher education (Patton et al., 2019, p. 124). Now is the time for practitioners across higher education settings to identify where deficit thinking may have influenced their past practices, to seek alternative approaches to their work, and to research the influence of changes to language. Where counter-storytelling is “a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege” in higher education research (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 32), what is the role of asset-based language in day-to-day college administration? Where students in a classroom are engaged in the learning process by nurturing cultural capital (Yosso, 2005), what is the role of asset-based language in classroom communications? We encourage further exploration of these asset-based concepts in student performance, student employment, student conduct, internships and the many other educationally impactful settings on college campuses to continue addressing the question—“where to start?”

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