

Laurie A. Schreiner explores the privilege inherent in the concept of grit and questions the wisdom of using it to support student success.

By Laurie A. Schreiner 

# The Privilege of Grit

**I MET JEROME WHEN HE WAS A SENIOR IN ONE** of the psychology classes I taught. He stood out from the rest of the class not only in his academic performance but also in the ways he approached class—always prepared, asking good questions, going above and beyond in his assignments. He was the dream student—hard working, curious, passionate about his educational goal of earning a PhD in child psychology so he could make a difference in the lives of foster kids. A product of the foster care system himself, Jerome had been orphaned in first grade and had been shuttled in and out of foster homes yet had always worked hard in each new school, eventually earning a scholarship to college. When I met him, he talked of how he had always been fascinated by what made people tick—an excellent quality in a budding psychologist. He spent hours reading books and was an inveterate people watcher, so that by the time he entered college, he had acquired a level of emotional intelligence far beyond his years. It was crystal clear to me—Jerome had what psychologist Angela Duckworth calls *grit*, a passionate perseverance toward a long-term goal. Jerome was a hard worker who had overcome all the odds to succeed in college and go on to a top grad school. He had made something of himself.

It's a seductive story reflective of the American Dream: boy overcomes poverty and trauma through sheer effort to become a shining example of success for others. It reassures us that all is right in the universe. And yes, it can happen...sometimes. But there is an insidious danger in what Christine Yeh (2017), Chair of the Counseling Psychology Department at the

University of San Francisco, calls our “national obsession” with these stories and with the concept of grit itself: It overlooks the role that systemic privilege plays in people's lives.

## Grit: The Key to Student Success?

**ANGELA DUCKWORTH HAS AUTHORED OR** coauthored numerous books and journal articles on grit; in one of these research articles, Duckworth et al. (2007) defined grit as “perseverance and passion for long-term goals” (p. 1087). Gritty people work hard over the long haul, possessing a great deal of stamina as they pursue goals. But the most common misconception that people have about grit is that it is *just* about effort. Working hard is only one part of the equation. Along with *perseverance*—investing considerable effort over a long period of time in spite of adversity and obstacles—is *passion*, that is, an abiding interest in the same ultimate goal. This passion begins early in life and is cultivated and deepened over time until it becomes a focused life philosophy. As the basis of her work, Duckworth has studied what she calls “paragons of grit.” These are the success stories we love to hear: people at the top of their game, winning Nobel prizes or Olympic gold medals, or starting billion-dollar companies out of their garages after overcoming staggering odds. And she presents compelling research that the grittier people are, the more likely they are to go to college, to complete a degree, to earn advanced degrees, and to be engaged in one rewarding career over a lifetime. Who wouldn't want to see that happen for every student?

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But is grit the key to student success? If students just had enough grit, would they succeed in college? More importantly, can we cultivate grit in our students? Duckworth thinks so. But the research is contradictory here—an important point that many educators fail to notice. For example, Duckworth insists grit can grow when you not only intrinsically enjoy what you do and feel a sense of purpose about that but also when you practice rigorously every day and keep going during tough times. She adds that grit will grow if you focus on your weaknesses “over and over again, for hours a day, week after month after year” (p. 91), a finding that is contradictory to much of the current research on assets and strengths as a foundation for intrinsic motivation. Additionally, there is significant evidence—which Duckworth acknowledges—that almost 40% of the variation in grittiness is inherited and, more importantly, that grit is a personality trait very similar to conscientiousness. People who are organized, efficient, careful, and invest effort into their work are conscientious. This particular trait has been studied extensively by psychologists over the years and is strongly connected to success in life. Yet, as a personality trait that shows remarkable stability over a lifetime, conscientiousness is not particularly amenable to interventions.

However, grit is not only an individual personality trait. The majority of the variation in grit levels is due to the environment in which one was reared. As Duckworth notes in her book, “the environment we grow up in really does matter, and it matters a lot” (p. 83). All the paragons of grit that Duckworth described in her book had someone in their life—usually their parents—who expressed continual support of their interests, whether that was paying for violin lessons (and for the violin itself), attending every soccer game, paying for coaches and swim lessons, or making enough money to have access to a swimming pool. At the very least, these paragons of grit had what Duckworth refers to as “psychologically wise” (p. 213) people in their lives, persons who were warm, supportive, and also held high expectations of them.

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**LAURIE A. SCHREINER** is Professor and Chair of Higher Education at Azusa Pacific University. Coauthor of *Thriving in Transitions: A Research-Based Approach to Student Success* (2012), Schreiner has developed The Thriving Quotient as a holistic measure of student well-being.

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## The Privilege of Grit

**AND THEREIN LIES THE PRIVILEGE** implicit in grit. Swimming lessons, access to a pool, and the ability to take time off work to attend a child’s swim meets is a luxury that is simply unavailable to low-income persons. Even being able to get off work for a parent-teacher meeting at school is something many low-income parents can ill afford. Other aspects of a supportive environment are also laden with social class privilege that many take for granted: being able to purchase soccer or softball uniforms or a musical

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instrument, having a car to drive a child to games or lessons, even going to a school that still has the budget to offer extracurricular activities, music, and art. There is an ever-widening gap in the US between the rich and poor, and that gap extends to participation in extracurricular activities.

More worrisome is that the income gap is widening in college completion rates and is evident in grit scores. In fact, the income gap in college completion rates is now the largest in history: According to a report of the National Center for Education Statistics authored by Grace Kena et al. (2015), a high-income student with an SAT score in the bottom quartile has a greater chance of completing college (30%) than a low-income student with an SAT score in the

top quartile of the nation (26%). Could having more grit help? Maybe, but Duckworth has also found that low-income high school seniors' grit scores are a full point lower (on a 6-point scale) than their high-income counterparts.

The privilege inherent in grit is not only a function of the family support often tied to wealth. The privilege of being able to identify and pursue a passion also depends on societal support. This support is evident in well-equipped schools and better-trained teachers in wealthier neighborhoods, but it is also evident in the norms that tend to accompany being part of the dominant culture. These norms are so much a part of the cultural fabric that they are invisible and thus represent both social class and white privilege. For example, the narrative of the dominant culture is that of the "American dream"—you can be anything you want to be if you're willing to work hard enough. You can pursue your calling, prepare for any kind of career,

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attend any college if your grades and test scores are high enough. The sky's the limit, and the road to success lies in simply pulling yourself up by your bootstraps. Of course, that assumes you can afford boots.

In contrast, students attending low-income schools or growing up in a minoritized culture in the US learn early that hard work is simply not enough, which is incomprehensible to those in the dominant culture. How can hard work not be enough? How can effort not pay off for everyone? Yet hard-working first-generation students getting straight As who don't know that a Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) is

required by June 30th in order to get financial aid or who have never been encouraged to go to college by the one guidance counselor serving all 3,000 students in their low-income high school simply do not have access to the same path to success that is taken for granted by every student in the wealthier school districts.

For those who make it to college, expectations remain low, and hard work is still not enough, as can be seen in Kent Harber et al's research in the *Journal of Educational Psychology* on the quality of feedback teachers give to students of color. In this experimental study, teachers reading the same poor-quality essay from a student whom they thought was white provided more specific and instructive feedback on how to improve than when they thought the student was black. The feedback provided to the student they thought was black was sparse and vague, indirectly communicating a lack of expectation for improvement. Because feedback is an essential element of the learning process, both the poor quality of the feedback and the sheer lack of feedback places students of color at a distinct disadvantage once they arrive to college. When faculty are confronted with these results indicative of implicit bias, they often express shock; they have no idea students of color could be receiving such systematically different feedback. And again, that is the nature of privilege: Those who are privileged remain blissfully unaware of how they have benefitted from a system through no effort of their own. They assume the system that worked for them works for everyone.

## The Dangers of Grit

**HOWEVER, IMPLICIT PRIVILEGE IS NOT** the only danger of focusing solely on grit as the key to student success. There are four other dangers that are worthy of note because they contribute to an environment that not only creates false hope in educators about the pathways to student success but perpetuates many of the inequities that have led to the current achievement gap.

### Focused on the Individual

Grit is an individual trait, one that closely resembles the personality trait of conscientiousness. Continuing to focus on individual student characteristics as the key to student success absolves educators and institutions of any responsibility in the equation. As Estella Ben-simon (2007) noted in her presidential address to the Association for the Study of Higher Education in 2007, this focus on the student as the author of her or his own success ignores the vital role that faculty, staff, and administrators play in creating environments conducive to success and forming relationships with students

that facilitate or impede such success. The dominant paradigm represented in current US higher education research features a self-motivated and goal-oriented student who is free to choose where to go to college, how and with whom to spend her or his time, and in which activities to engage. Yet this scenario is often not the reality for low-income students or students from cultures historically underrepresented in higher education. This paradigm also ignores the important role of the environment in shaping behavior. Duckworth herself notes in her book that “developing your personal grit depends critically on other people” (p. 269), and she encourages a “culture of grit” characterized by “deep and rich support and a relentless challenge to improve” (p. 266). Yet the National Assessment of Educational Progress produced by the Department of Education in 2016—what is known as “the nation’s report card”—emphasized the importance of measuring and cultivating grit in individual students as a key strategy for helping struggling students succeed. No mention was made of the environmental, structural, personnel, or ideological changes needed to help struggling students.

## Founded on a Deficit Ideology

Paul Gorski (2016), a sociologist at George Mason University, is one of the most vocal critics of what he calls “the grit ideology” (p. 381). He believes that a grit ideology is even more dangerous than the deficit ideology on which it was founded. A deficit ideology identifies the personal shortcomings of people who are struggling, focusing on individual attitudes, behaviors, mindsets, and characteristics that impede their success. As an example, those with a deficit ideology view poverty as a natural consequence of the problematic attitudes and behaviors of those who are poor. This ideology has certainly been the dominant paradigm in US higher education as students begin the college experience with a battery of placement tests to pinpoint the greatest deficits they bring with them to college. We then require students to spend most of their first year correcting these deficits before allowing them to enroll in the “college-level” courses required for graduation. Duckworth frames the cultivation of grit in deficit terms as well, with exhortations to “zero in on your weaknesses....over and over again” (p. 91).

However, Gorski maintains that grit ideology takes the deficit ideology one step further. He notes that those with a deficit ideology ignore the structural barriers to success and attribute failure solely to the mindsets of the individuals. In contrast, adherents to a grit ideology are aware of and even acknowledge structural barriers; however, rather than working to remove the barriers, they focus on cultivating the grit of those

who have been marginalized by such barriers. That strategy seems more manageable and practical. But, as Gorski notes, not a single one of the barriers that most impact low-income students’ educational outcomes is “related in any way” (p. 382) to their grit. As a result, we end up blaming students who have been victimized by an inequitable system: If only students would try harder, they would succeed. It’s their own fault if they don’t—their own laziness, lack of resilience, and lack of effort got them in this mess. In the process, we ignore the toll that housing instability, food insecurity, or demands to care for family members or hold down a job

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to pay for books and commuting costs takes on low-income students’ ability to focus on intellectual tasks.

## Framed as Able to Be Cultivated

A third danger of focusing solely on grit as the key to student success is the belief that it can be readily cultivated. “Grow your grit” makes for a catchy slogan. But can grit be cultivated? In addition to the earlier research I cited that almost 40% of the variation in grit levels is genetic, a meta-analysis conducted by research psychologists Marcus Credé, Michael Tynan, and Peter Harms of 88 grit studies indicated that, thus far, there has been no substantive empirical evidence to support the malleability of grit. This meta-analysis also confirmed that grit appears to be a “repackaging of conscientiousness” (p. 11). However, we know that the investment of effort is malleable, as Carol Dweck and her colleagues have demonstrated in their research on growth mindset. Students who possess a growth mindset believe that academic ability changes with practice; they know that effort is required for success and leads to a higher likelihood of success. Thus, to the extent

that we can shape a student's mindset or motivate a student to invest quality effort, that aspect of grit may be able to be cultivated. But it doesn't take an emphasis on grit to obtain this result; Dweck and her colleagues have already demonstrated that interventions focused on students' mindset have a significant effect on their academic success in college. Shaping students' mindsets is thus a more reliable and cost-effective way of impacting the likelihood of their success in college.

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And as Marcus Credé, Tynan, and Harms (2016) concluded after their meta-analysis, there are other cognitive and non-cognitive factors that make a bigger difference in student success than grit does.

### Fear that We Will "Admit for Grit"

But perhaps the biggest danger of an obsessive focus on grit is that we will measure it in college applicants and use it to determine admission status. In a well-intentioned effort not to overemphasize admissions test scores that may be biased against students historically underserved by higher education, there is already a nationwide effort to assess what researcher Steve Robbins et al. (2004) call "psychosocial factors" and what education professor and author William

Sedlacek (2004) calls "non-cognitive factors" as indicators of readiness for college. Many of these factors are predictive of first-year college grades and of persistence to graduation, as grit is. But unlike grit, Robbins' psychosocial factors are malleable; his research on interventions with struggling students has demonstrated that first-year seminars and workshops on academic self-regulation, along with encouraging students' social engagement with others, result in significant gains in motivation, academic discipline, and social connectedness—and subsequently with GPA and persistence.

The difficulty lies in assessing individual personality traits as a condition for admission. Not only are such tests easy to fake, as Duckworth acknowledges, but they have the unintended effect of denying admission to the very students most in need of the advantages a college education provides. Rather than eradicating the barriers to success for low-income and marginalized students, admitting students on the basis of their grit scores perpetuates the systemic injustice that has hindered their success all their lives. Yet, in universities' laser focus on graduation rates as the ultimate measure of institutional effectiveness, the temptation is to admit only those students who are most likely to succeed. Adding grit to the mix increases our institutional odds for success, but at the cost of contributing to the ever-widening achievement gap in the US between the "haves" and the "have-nots."

### Is there an Alternative to Grit?

**GRIT IN AND OF ITSELF** is not a bad thing; after all, it *is* somewhat predictive of student success outcomes that matter. It is the overemphasis on grit as a panacea, as the primary key to student success, that raises concerns. Yet it is not enough to simply raise concerns about this overemphasis. Is there an alternative approach that is equally predictive of success and under our control yet confronts the issues of inherent privilege and a misplaced focus on the individual student as the author of her or his success? Ironically, the answer lies in Duckworth's own personal mission: "to use psychological science to help kids thrive" (p. 65).

A *thriving ideology* is a viable alternative to a grit ideology because it places the responsibility for student success on educators and leaders and the environments they create, while scaffolding student responsibility for learning and working to reduce the barriers to success. Thriving focuses on malleable qualities that can be developed within students and practitioners alike. As a result, well-timed and effectively executed interventions—not only for students but for faculty and staff as well—can make a difference

in student success. Rather than focusing on students' weaknesses, a thriving ideology emphasizes what researchers George Kuh, Jillian Kinzie, John Shuh, Elizabeth Whitt, and Associates call a talent development approach, that all students admitted to the institution are capable of learning under the right conditions and that it is the responsibility of institutional leaders to provide the right conditions for learning. Most importantly, thriving represents a holistic view of success that incorporates intellectual, interpersonal, and psychological engagement and well-being that lasts beyond the attainment of a college degree and is the foundation of a good life—and it predicts more of the unique variation in student success outcomes than grit does, as my own studies have repeatedly demonstrated.

## Cultivating a Thriving Campus

**THE MAJOR POINT THAT HAS** been largely overlooked in educators' grasping for grit is that environment matters as much, if not more, to student success

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outcomes than individual traits that remain relatively stable over a lifetime. Cultivating a campus environment where all students can thrive is a worthy objective that allows us to focus on *both* the community of

learners and the individual students within that community who face daunting barriers to their success. Three specific actions can begin to shift the campus ethos from a grit ideology to a thriving ideology.

## Build a Sense of Community on Campus

Rather than measuring grit in individual students at admission or designing programs to build a personality trait that research has demonstrated to be quite difficult to change, our efforts would be better invested by building a sense of community on campus. In our research on thriving, we have consistently found sense of community to be the major contributor to thriving across all types of students, even after controlling for their demographic characteristics, participation levels on campus, and personality characteristics. A sense of community on campus has been defined by community psychologists John Lounsbury and Daniel DeNeui (1995) as feeling part of a network of people within the institution to whom one matters and with whom one is engaged in meaningful work. This network is not simply having friends, but is a connection to the larger mission and ethos of the college or university. Students with a strong sense of community feel they belong, but they also have a sense of ownership because they feel “heard” by university leaders and believe they can contribute to the campus community. They are emotionally connected to others in the institution and work together toward common goals.

Building a sense of community begins before students ever arrive on campus as they form impressions of an institution during the admissions process. When students perceive that the college or university was accurately portrayed during the admissions process, that their daily interactions with faculty and staff are consistent with the mission of the institution, and that their expectations have been met, they believe that an institution is delivering on its promises. John Braxton et al. (2014), in their book *Rethinking College Student Retention*, refer to this perception as institutional integrity. And we have found it to be the biggest predictor of students' sense of community on campus.

Actions that build institutional integrity occur in the daily interactions students have with staff and faculty. Every transaction a student has with a representative of the institution is a “moment of truth” that either enhances or detracts from students' positive impressions of the institution. When faculty and staff have a clear sense of the mission and values of the institution, as well as a shared vision for where the institution is going, they can more easily align themselves in ways that communicate institutional integrity to students.

Students who are involved in decision making within the institution are more likely to feel a sense of ownership about the campus, and this ownership builds their sense of community. When students feel they have been able to provide input that is taken into consideration by institutional leaders, they learn to trust the institution and feel they are part of it. Regularly assessing students' expectations and how well they have been met, perhaps through a nationally normed instrument such as the *Student Satisfaction Inventory*, sends a message that student feedback is valued. Communicating clearly to students what actions the institution will or will not take to close the biggest gaps between expectations and satisfaction sends an even stronger message that their input matters.

Because students who are on the "margins" of campus life may find it difficult to experience a sense of community on campus, intentionally inviting students to programs, campus activities and organizations, and decision-making opportunities becomes a

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key strategy on a thriving campus. Rather than passively offering a menu of programs and services from which students can select, student development professionals can ensure that all students have a strong connection with an advisor, peer mentor, or faculty member who will seek them out and personally invite them into opportunities that are best suited for their

interests or needs. Laura Rendón's research on validation indicates that this type of intentionality signals to marginalized students that they are *known*—that they are an acknowledged member of the campus community whose presence and participation is needed and wanted. When students are included in the planning and implementation of programs, the likelihood of experiencing a sense of community is multiplied further.

## Student Learning as the Heart of the Institutional Mission

A grit ideology places the locus of responsibility to learn and succeed on the individual student. Educators who subscribe to this ideology thus spend most of their time planning and implementing workshops, programs, and classroom strategies to encourage individual students to work harder, focus on their weaknesses, and invest significant time and energy toward their success. On a thriving campus, leaders view learning as a mutual responsibility between the student and the institution. Learning is at the center of the institution's actions, and every decision is judged through a learning lens: How does this decision help our students learn and grow? Viewed through that lens, institutional leaders may well make significantly different decisions about their policies, practices, and even the way they prioritize the construction of new facilities. A learning ethos permeates the thriving campus, with the recognition that learning happens in and out of the classroom.

But this attention to student learning does not mean that our interventions are solely focused on students. The learning environment—including the faculty and staff who comprise it—is equally important. Equipping these institutional agents with strategies to cultivate the student attitudes and behaviors associated with success, as well as with a mindset that their students have the capacity to succeed, can increase the odds of student success on campus.

On a thriving campus, efforts to enhance student success through programs and workshops are just as likely to focus on faculty and staff as on students. For instance, equipping faculty with research-based strategies such as Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck's growth mindset enables faculty to more effectively interact with students in and out of the classroom. Learning that the mindset of instructors matters just as much as the student's mindset often provides faculty with an opportunity to rethink their approach to student feedback and their own pedagogy. Introducing faculty to inclusive pedagogies that effectively build community and engagement in their diverse class-

rooms is reflective of a thriving ideology that will lead to greater student success—and stands in sharp contrast to institutional programming that only emphasizes the investment of greater effort and motivation by the individual student.

Likewise, encouraging staff as well as faculty to engage with students and to go beyond the transactional nature of providing services is reflective of a thriving ideology that can support student success. When staff see themselves as partners with faculty in creating a positive learning environment for all students, they are more likely to experience a sense of community themselves and be better positioned as assets for student success. Staff development opportunities that equip campus personnel to create a more inclusive environment can be an effective strategy to create a thriving campus. Regular feedback to staff about how students experience interactions within their office, along with input from students about the type of interactions with staff that are most helpful, can position institutional leaders to more easily call attention to the role these important institutional agents play in student success.

Student success programming remains part of a thriving campus, but the nature of those interventions shifts to malleable strategies that students can learn and implement in a relatively short period of time. As Marcus Credé et al. noted in their meta-analysis of grit studies, there is significant evidence that focusing on adjustment issues in first-year students, teaching high-risk students effective study skills and habits, and cultivating resiliency in all students is strongly correlated with student success. Carol Dweck and her associates have demonstrated the effectiveness of teaching students to have a growth mindset, and positive psychologist Martin Seligman and colleagues have a long track record of effectively impacting college students' levels of optimism and resilience. Adopting a thriving ideology means that our student success approaches change—they become customized to individual students' needs and they focus on what is malleable and strongly connected to student success. These programs and services also become normalized within the environment; that is, the institution clearly communicates that *all* students are expected to take advantage of opportunities to develop success strategies.

## Bring out the Best in Others

Finally, in contrast to a grit ideology that focuses on improving weaknesses as the best way for students to succeed, a thriving campus intentionally identifies and leverages what its students, faculty, and staff

do best. Learning what each person can contribute to the campus community is a high priority for such institutions, as are expectations that each community member will regularly contribute their best. Rather than subscribing to the deficit ideology that undergirds grit, a thriving ideology has as its hallmark *strengths development*—that is, identifying and nurturing the talents each person brings into the environment, encouraging the development of these talents into strengths of character and competence. As psy-

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chologists Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman (2004) have outlined in their book, *Character Strengths and Virtues*, strengths of character are the virtues that have historically been valued across time and culture and that form the foundation of a good life, such as wisdom, courage, and justice. Strengths of competence, such as those measured by The Gallup Organization's *StrengthsFinder*, are ways of processing information and relating to others that leads to consistent levels of excellence. Both are needed in today's college students.

George Kuh and his associates working with the *National Survey of Student Engagement* have noted that talent development is one of the distinguishing attitudes of institutions in which students are highly engaged. When faculty and staff subscribe to a talent development philosophy, they believe that all students admitted to their institution are capable of learning under the right conditions—and they believe it is their responsibility as educators to provide the appropriate

conditions for learning. This philosophy undergirds a thriving campus.

The result of these actions is that we provide a safety net for our most vulnerable students so that even those students who have not been privileged enough to develop grit can thrive. But more importantly, we shift the responsibility for success from solely being the responsibility of the individual student to being a shared responsibility among students, faculty, staff, and institutional leaders.

## A Call to Action

**ALTHOUGH MY FIRST IMPRESSION OF** Jerome was that he epitomized grit, the story behind his success at “beating the odds” was one of how institutional agents had supported him throughout his educational career. His high school principal had established a strengths-oriented climate that empowered teachers and guidance counselors to identify and bring out the best in students, providing both challenge and support. His school district had partnered with the local university to help more students gain access to a bachelor’s degree; this partnership included mentoring and scholarship funding for those students who fully engaged in the program. And upon entrance to this university, Jerome was again surrounded by intentional support systems and challenging opportunities to identify and develop his talents. He was part of a first-year experience that provided rewarding relationships with a caring faculty member and peers and that introduced him to the concept of growth mindset and cognitive reframing. Yes, he worked hard—but he did so because he was part of an environment that clearly conveyed that effort was both normative and necessary. His instructors believed in his ability to succeed, and the learning community created in his classes resulted in a support network that made success more likely.

After learning the whole story of Jerome’s life and educational experiences, I found myself wondering: What if *we* as institutional leaders had a passion for student success, along with perseverance over the long haul to work toward that goal? What if *our* mission in life was to create campus environments where all students could thrive? The answer to student success may not lie within the grit our students possess but rather in our commitment as educators to cultivating a learning environment where all students can succeed. When staff, faculty, and administrators are committed to student thriving as the ultimate outcome of a college education and relentlessly pursue that goal with passion and unwavering effort, students will reap the benefits.

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