

Enhancing Resiliency Factors within Collegiate Environments

By Eva Glahn Atkinson, MA, CADC, LMFT
Brescia University evaa@omuonline.net

Resiliency research has emerged from 50-years of discovery by Emmy Werner, Michael Rutter, Norman Garmezy, Hawkins and Catalano, Peter Benson, and Derek Peterson.¹ Identification of “protective factors” (that is a system of supports) has enabled us to look at the issue of dependency in a new way. The more supports (protective factors) people have, the more likely they are to succeed in school, be tolerant, help others and abstain from alcohol or drugs. Supports are *tangible factors* (factors provided by individuals and institutions) and *intangible factors* (values, beliefs, and skills internalized by the individual). This movement reflects a new philosophical approach that recognizes the significance of positive attributes in the human condition, rather than focusing on problems that interfere with growth and development. Problems can be prevented, faced and solved, in a community that fosters the traits and skills allowing individuals to make good decisions and bounce back from adversity. Our nation's campuses, as communities, are critical in building protective factors in students.

Since campuses create new communities for students, we must go beyond the current paradigm. Problematic for higher education is the little known about protective factors needed to ensure post-secondary students' success, health and avoidance of risk behaviors. We need to identify the protective factors of the campus/residence environment that build supports resulting in matriculation, retention and graduation; which include: 1) the connections made by all campus staff and personnel with students; 2) the campus environmental conditions; and 3) campus social norms.

Prevention research, programming and funding are largely focuses on risk reduction. "Risk and protective factors" are cited in Higher Education literature; yet, there is great disparity in defining what those factors are for the traditional-aged college student². The Search Institute identified 40 Developmental Assets.³ A session conducted by Dr. Chapman and Dr. Beth DeRicco, at The U.S. Department of Education's 21st Annual National Meeting on Alcohol and Other Drug Abuse and Violence Prevention in Higher Education in Omaha, included application of these developmental assets to student life.

Chapman's list is consistent with factors identified in, "Living and Learning: Residence Hall Environments that Help Students Succeed" by a group of Alaska-based Residence Life professionals.⁴ This book was an outcome of a 5-year FIPSE grant funded Alaska Resiliency in Residence Life Project, begun in 1998 by Derek Peterson.⁵ Peterson had a previous career, serving on the faculty of liberal arts colleges and as Vice President of Student Services. The partnership between Association of Alaska School Boards (AASB) Initiative for Community Engagement (Alaska ICE), two private liberal arts colleges, two state universities, and three 9-12 grade residential high schools was a new incarnation of an old idea, founded in Campus Ecology. Peterson sought to identify optimal supports (protective factors) increasing the likelihood students would thrive in residential-educational environments.

Findings from this project have implications across secondary and collegiate residential-educational environment. When we identify the supports that students need to be successful in residential-educational environments, there will be clear outcomes on which to focus our shared efforts. By identifying these supports, professionals would be better able to establish programs and services to build and sustain them, as well as measure their effectiveness and progress. Student Life programs across the nation can undertake efforts to build these supports in the lives of all their students. To this end, the discipline of Integrative Youth Development™ was created to teach campus professionals what we know about the developmental ecology of the college student.

The findings of this project will be disseminated in a conference planned for Fall 2008; contact Eva (eva12.08@gmail.com) for program information.

1. Hawkins, J.D. & Catalano, R.F. (1992). *Communities That Care; Action for Drug Abuse Prevention*. JB Jossey-Bass Publishers.
2. Fenzel, L. (2005). Multivariate Analyses of Predictors of Heavy Episodic Drinking and Drinking-Related Problems among College Students. *Journal of College Student Development*. Retrieved from: <http://tinyurl.com/2d8dat>; January 21, 2008.
3. Retrieved from: <http://www.search-institute.org/assets>; February 1, 2008.
4. Schleich, L. (ed). (2005). *Living and Learning: Residence Hall Environments that Help Students Succeed*. Juneau, AK: AASB/Alaska ICE.
5. Walser, N. (2006) 'R' is for Resilience. *Harvard Education Letter*. 22, 1-3. Retrieved from: <http://tinyurl.com/336zuf>; January 11, 2008.

Eva Glahn Atkinson, MA, LMFT, CADC
Counseling Center Director , Brescia University (www.brescia.edu)
Project Director, Kentucky Network for Collegiate Substance Abuse Prevention
(www.kynetwork.org)
STC-Kentucky, The Network (www.thenetwork.ws)

Brescia University
717 Frederica St.
Owensboro KY 42301
ph 270-686-4282
fax 270-686-4309
email: evaa@brescia.edu