

## TRANSFORMATIVE LEARNING

### ***The Transformative Effect of Building a Route to a Desired Future Self***

Much research has been done in recent decades about what are termed social-psychological interventions with students that result in improved academic performance. Such interventions are so named because the intervention is not something targeting an external activity on the part of teachers or students; social-psychological interventions target the inner worlds of students.

Examples include interventions focused on students' mindsets and on the stereotypes they may be accepting about themselves as members of a particular group (see the [Transformative Learning article in the July 2012 issue](#) and the [Great Teaching article in the April 2014 issue](#) targeted at students' self-authorship (e.g., Baxter Magolda, 2010, and [work by Dr. Melissa Peet](#) of the University of Michigan, who was a keynoter at the March 2014 Transformative Learning Conference and who'll be back for the August 2014 Collegium on College Teaching Practice), and interventions addressing self-efficacy (e.g., Bandura, 1977).

One such intervention aims to help students construct a future self that is not only imaginable, but is attainable via guided, yet self-defined, strategies. The result is improved academic achievement and persistence.

Morisano, Hirsch, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore (2010) tested a randomized, controlled intervention with 85 college undergraduates with half completing a low-cost, simple goal-setting activity and the other half completing a control task with intervention-quality face validity. The half doing the goal-setting activity exhibited statistically significant improvements in academic achievement and attendance throughout the four months of the tracking period after the intervention.

Basically, the intervention guided students through an 8-step process:

1. Students free-wrote for a specified period of time about their ideal future, things they admired in others, things they could do better, their school and career futures, things they would like to learn more about, and habits they would like to improve.
2. Students then examined their free writing to extract seven or eight specific goals that could help them reach their desired state.
3. Students ranked their goals based on importance and also factoring in attainability.
4. Students wrote about the impact achieving each goal would have on their lives and on the lives of others.
- 5-7. Students elaborated on specific strategies for goal attainment, identifying sub-goals and benchmarks, for instance.
8. Students evaluated the degree of commitment they had for achieving each goal. (Morisano, et al., 2010)

(You can do this guided writing activity yourself for a low cost — \$30, which includes written feedback — by visiting [www.selfauthoring.com](http://www.selfauthoring.com), where the researchers involved in this work house multiple resources.)

The results were impressive for improving academic performance and persistence:

An easily administered, standardized, and time-limited goalsetting intervention produced improvements in academic success among struggling university students. This low-cost intervention could potentially be used by academic institutions to help 1st-year students establish goals and increase their academic prospects; it could also be used as a treatment for students on academic probation. (Morisano, et al., 2010, p. 261)

Here is an intervention that is non-discipline-specific, that works with a one-time application of the eight-step process that takes only minimal time in total, and which is not complicated, expensive, and does not require fancy tools or technology. The results, though, are all things Higher Education desires for students: “(a) increased GPA, (b) higher probability of maintaining a full course load, and (c) reductions in self-reported negative affect” (Morisano, et al., 2010, p. 260).

This kind of intervention, delivered to all students as part of their required start-up sequence for their postsecondary academic careers, could pay big dividends in Transformative Learning because the outcomes — better grades, more classes completed in a shorter period of time, and better feelings about self while all this happens — empower students and expand their perspectives of themselves by providing them with tools and maps they will put to use to accomplish college work and feel good about themselves in the process.

## References

Bandura, A. (1977). Self-efficacy: Toward a unifying theory of behavioral change. *Psychological Review*, 84, 191-215.

Magolda, M. B. B. (2010). The interweaving of epistemological, intrapersonal, and interpersonal development in the evolution of self-authorship. In M.B. Magolda, E.F. Creamer and P.S. Meszaros (Eds.), *Development and Assessment of Self-Authorship* (pp. 25-43). Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing.

Morisano, D., Hirsch, J. B., Peterson, J. B., Pihl, R. O., & Shore, B. M. (2010). Setting, elaborating, and reflecting on personal goals improves academic performance. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 95(2), 255-264.