

# Perspectives

Community College Leadership for the 21st Century

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There is still much that needs to be done if grit, tenacity, and perseverance are to become a pervasive priority in education. There are no quick fixes.

- U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology

Educators should seek to build campus ecosystems where those with grit can shine, strengthen themselves and inspire others... Such interior growth is one of the great aims of education.

- Daniel R. Porterfield

## Doctorate in Community College Leadership

Empowering graduates to advance community colleges towards excellence and community responsiveness through exemplary leadership.



ENROLLING NOW FOR THE NEXT COHORT

## Grit vs GRIT: It's a Matter of Quality

**Lee Ann Nutt, EdD**

President

Lone Star College – Tomball  
Tomball, Texas

For almost a decade, community colleges across the nation have been responding to the call to action to help more students finish what they start. Policies, processes, procedures, programs, and practices have been evaluated, updated, removed, added, scaled, and assessed. As a result, persistence, retention, and completion rates are improving slightly, but there is still significant work to be done. The time has come to do more and to include students in the completion equation.

As open enrollment institutions, and thus by their very nature, community colleges attract a variety of students, including some of the grittiest students in America. Students successfully complete degrees with 4.0 grade point averages while raising children (often as single parents), working multiple jobs, and/or coping with other very real, very complex challenges, such as hunger and homelessness. These students exist, yet there is a completion problem in community colleges.

In addition to determined, resilient, gritty students, there are also those who are insecure as they may have never had a positive academic experience. They may have been told directly, or indirectly, they are not "college material." It is highly likely no one in their family attended college. When these students face a challenge, they may interpret the experience as confirmation that college is not for them. They choose to not finish what they started.

Opposite of this category of insecure students are those who experienced moderate academic success without having to try very hard. They may have been told how smart they are, and they probably earned trophies for participating. It is possible their parents overinvolved themselves in their education, making sure each class project was perfect and all A's were given (even if they were undeserved). When these students finally experience an academic challenge, they may take it personally but without taking responsibility. After all, they are smart, capable, and have never failed before.

In the context, then, of improving college completion rates, the question should be asked, "What differentiates successful and unsuccessful students?" Recently, the answer to this question has been gravitating toward a one-word answer: grit.

Grit, which has garnered much attention and increasingly

intense scrutiny in higher education, invokes motivational associations. Never give up. No excuses. Work harder. Just do it. Failure is not an option. Some synonyms are resolve, determination, fortitude, tenacity, and perseverance.

These are characteristics that should be nurtured and developed in students, right? Of course, but the primary issue with grit is that it is typically thought of only in terms of quantity. A lot of grit leads to success. Alternatively, without grit students will fail. However, a student can demonstrate a lot of grit and still not pursue goals in healthy or productive ways. For example, does a student who repeatedly takes the same developmental math class (and fails repeatedly) have grit? Yes! Is allowing a gritty student to repeatedly take the same class without adjusting their pathway or study approach acceptable? No! Considering grit only in terms of its quantity can lead to great misunderstanding and misuse of the concept in education.

Critics of grit are providing important context for the student success narrative, which is already laden with negative undertones around the myriad reasons students do not finish college. The deficit narrative sounds like this: Students

are not college ready; students are unmotivated; students won't take responsibility. They're entitled. They don't study. They don't do optional. We must ensure that "lack of grit" does not also become part of the deficit narrative. Further, the narrative needs to change from what students can't do to what they can do.

To change the deficit narrative and prevent the unintended outcomes that *grit* critics are concerned about, a more meaningful, robust, and holistic construct is needed. That is...GRIT, which is defined by Dr. Paul G. Stoltz in his best-selling book *GRIT: The New Science of What it Takes to Persevere, Flourish, Succeed* as "your capacity to dig deep, to do whatever it takes – even struggle, sacrifice, suffer – to achieve your most worthy goals." GRIT is an acronym for:

- ▲ Growth – seeking fresh ideas, perspectives and information
  - ▲ Resilience – responding constructively to and being strengthened by adversity
  - ▲ Instinct – reassessing, rerouting and even readjusting pursuits and approaches
  - ▲ Tenacity – committing to and sticking with pursuits
- Robustness, another component of GRIT, accounts for an individual's perception of: (1) how difficult his/her life has

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*[P]ersistence, retention, and completion rates are improving slightly, but there is still significant work to be done. The time has come to do more and to include students in the completion equation.*

## EMERGING LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES

Scholars have offered various insights into how individuals develop the habits and behaviors to help them stay on track to achieve goals, despite facing daunting challenges. As community college leaders struggle with the completion challenge, recent research suggests that the best predictor of success in college is not grades or SAT scores, but actually GRIT, the passion and perseverance for long-term goals. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

**To help students prepare to meet 21st-century challenges, how can college leaders design learning environments that promote grit, tenacity, and perseverance?**

### Amelia Ortiz Young, MS

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As conversations about increasing grit and growth mindset are consistent throughout higher education, two things are certain: It requires long-term commitment, and it must resonate at the student-level. Many consider Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of

Needs model an important model to consider when developing innovative strategies to increase grit, resilience, and perseverance in students.

Determining the secret that enables some students to persist through unimaginable situations and challenges to achieve their educational goals as compared to other individuals who cannot, may never be realized. However, an institution can serve as a source of support by creating an environment where students feel it is possible to survive the worst challenges, while still successfully attaining their educational goals.

Basic and psychological needs are the two primary factors that must be addressed in order to assist students gain the requisite skills to commit to their education. Based on my personal academic journey, when basic needs are not met, there is minimal energy to put towards academics. Establishing the college as an information center of community resources that provide sources to food, water, warmth, and rest is necessary to help students continue in school. A safe and secure environment that provides a strong sense of belonging is able to promote positive self-efficacy so students believe they are capable of being resilient when it comes to dealing with adversity. Encouraging belief in their abilities to be resilient will motivate students to persist towards their long-term goals of obtaining their education, regardless of what is happening externally.

A valuable strategy identified as successful in developing grit and a growth mindset is the implementation of using success stories of those students who are representative of new students to connect them with the success of others they perceive as relatable (Polirstok 2017).

Assisting students to envision themselves as successful can alter their mindset on how attainable their goals can be with hard work. Another strategy is to invest in student engagement activities on campus with peer tutoring and social engagement events focused on a campus culture that helps students feel they are an integral component of the campus.

Colleges that effectively address the needs of their students, empower them to focus on their goals by understanding resiliency will be mandatory to reach their full potential. The intent should be to transform the lives of all students by promoting the development of grit, resilience, and persistence in every aspect of their lives so they have the ability to continue reaching their goals. The desired outcome is to help students imagine a world they never knew was possible. And once that goal is accomplished, that is when an institution has truly succeeded.

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### Cynthia L. Cicchelli, MEd

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**Grit.** It's the buzzword that has educators talking and students listening and learning. A few years ago, Angela Duckworth brought this term forward during a TEDTalk conference where she presented on Grit: The power of passion and perseverance (2013). Since that time, the work of Carol Dweck, Gregory Walton, and Geoffrey Cohen (2014) has been discussed, evaluated, commented on, and perhaps most importantly, implemented in elementary, secondary, and higher education institutions around the country. With policy makers, administrators, and faculty all facing the challenge of helping students to succeed, this revolution of evaluating the students' "grittiness" and using that information to increase their awareness and involvement in their own success couldn't have come at a better time.

**Tenacity. Temerity. Stick-to-it-ivity.** At community colleges, admissions departments are identifying grit or other non-cognitive skills to determine the students' likelihood of success and placement or to identify appropriate support. Some colleges are using professionally-developed tools like Pearson's GRIT Gauge™ (2018) or the Noell Levits Ruffalo Student Strength Inventory™ (SSI) (2017) to measure non-cognitive skills that go beyond the SAT and ACT tests. These are either implemented as a part of the admissions process or during early coursework to ascertain ways that the institutions can provide interventions such as mentoring, supplemental instruction, or opportunities to advance learning. Others are using strategies that include increasing the awareness of students about their own grit needs then built upon through the assessment and feedback loop that raises their knowledge and grit skills. It is about creating a growth mindset, building a sense of belonging, making sure students see themselves as a part of the academic community, noting how their efforts are going to pay off (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2014).

**Resolve. Persistence. Drive.** The results are encouraging. Many studies have shown that those who have grit are more likely to succeed at their goals (Dweck, Walton, & Cohen, 2014). This not only applies to academics, but reaches into other areas of life such as the workplace and even marriage (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014). It's the foundation that will set the stage for future employability and life choices (Kyllonen, 2012).

But not everyone is happy. Some worry that we're blaming the students (Mehta, 2015); others are concerned that it is an injustice to the poor (Strauss, 2016); and still others believe that we are shifting the responsibility and using this as an excuse for not effectively engaging our students (Warner, 2016). It's a tough topic, no doubt.

**Retention. Completion.** It's what grit is all about. Despite the concerns, when used with thoughtful resolution, consistent and supportive application, this just might be the most important endeavor educators have ever undertaken. We're listening. We're doing. We won't give up.

**Cynthia Cicchelli, MEd**, currently serves as an Associate Dean who works with faculty, administrators, and staff at Schoolcraft College in Livonia, Michigan, in the Operations, Curriculum, and Assessment department, as well as the Center for Academic and Faculty Excellence. Cynthia holds a MEd from Wayne State University and is enrolled in the DCCL program at Ferris State University, as well as serving on the board for the Michigan Center for Student Success.



**Amelia Ortiz Young** is an Academic Advisor at Harper College for One Million Degrees (OMD), a scholarship program for highly-motivated underrepresented students. Amelia received her MS in Communication at University of Wisconsin-Whitewater. She is part of Ferris' Harper cohort in the DCCL Program. Her primary focus as a future college leader, is to increase the visibility and the educational attainment levels of underrepresented students throughout higher education.



## NATIONAL LEADER PERSPECTIVE

Scholars have offered various insights into how individuals develop the habits and behaviors to help them stay on track to achieve goals, despite facing daunting challenges. As community college leaders struggle with the completion challenge, recent research suggests that the best predictor of success in college is not grades or SAT scores, but actually GRIT, the passion and perseverance for long-term goals. We posed the following question to emerging and national leaders. Their answers appear below.

### Fostering Grit, Growth, and Goal Achievement in Community Colleges

**Marianne Adams Auten, EdD, MC**

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The importance of educational attainment has never been more clear – the number of years a person spends in school strongly predicts higher earnings, better health, and more community engagement (National Research Council, 2012). Yet, college completion in the United States has progressively fallen behind other developed countries with the U.S. college graduation rates now ranking 19th – a sharp drop from #1 in 1995 (Digest of Education Statistics 2014, NCES). From 2008 to 2014, despite a national mandate to dramatically increase the number of college graduates in the U.S., there was only about a 2% gain.

What can be done to help students close the achievement gap and thrive in the 21st century? To answer this question, conventional education approaches have tended to focus on the cognitive aspects of success in college, such as content knowledge as evidenced by test scores. In recent years, there has been a growing movement to explore “noncognitive” success factors such as grit, tenacity, and perseverance that are necessary for individuals to strive for and succeed at long-term, challenging goals such as completing a college degree. It is important not to see these factors as only residing within an individual, but also as the responsibility of community college leaders to design learning environments that foster grit, tenacity, and perseverance so that students are more apt to persist in the face of inevitable challenges and obstacles on the path to reaching their goals.

As a community college Counselor and Instructor, I see first-hand the difficulties that students face in persisting to complete their dream of earning a college degree – typically the gateway to a fulfilling career. Today’s community college student often has barriers that make it more difficult to persist, such as lack of support, very limited finances, family responsibilities, and being under-prepared academically. Yet, those of us who have worked in a community college for any length of time have seen many students with these barriers succeed and graduate. The obvious question becomes where does this “grit” come from? Can it be learned? Is it possible to design environments that promote grit, tenacity, and perseverance? Based on the research of Duckworth and others, the answer is definitely yes.

In my experience with students in the classroom and in individual counseling, as well as leading workshops for faculty and staff, I focus on three areas that I believe make the most difference in creating environments that foster student success. The good news about each of these “interventions” is that they are low-cost and every faculty and staff member can learn and use the strategies. These interventions include helping all students: 1) feel that they belong at this college, 2) believe that they can succeed academically through effort and effective learning strategies,

#### QUESTION OF THE MONTH:

*To help students prepare to meet 21st-century challenges, how can college leaders design learning environments that promote grit, tenacity, and perseverance?*

*It is...the responsibility of community college leaders to design learning environments that foster grit, tenacity, and perseverance so that students are more apt to persist in the face of inevitable challenges and obstacles on the path to reaching their goals.*

and 3) develop personal goals and values that are directly linked to achieving a future they desire.

A sense of belonging and believing that I can succeed in college are fundamental to persisting through obstacles and challenges. Many students fear that they are not “college material” and thus, the first time a low assignment grade occurs, it can be interpreted as evidence of not being smart enough to succeed. This can happen even though the real reason for the low score

was insufficient time preparing, rather than lack of ability. My simple strategy is to explicitly tell students that they do belong, no matter their academic history. I share stories of students who started badly, overcame obstacles and challenges, and achieved their goal of a degree and fulfilling career. Building community is key to belonging, so I learn names as quickly as possible and build in activities to learn each student’s interests and connect them to one another and to the campus.

The next “intervention” is to specifically teach growth mindset to students. I find that students are very interested in the science of mindset and how to apply this knowledge to become more effective learners. I have them read an article and engage in a series of activities to assess their own mindset and practice strategies to shift to more growth mindset thinking

by focusing on improving, growing, and learning instead of the all-too-common, “Am I good or not good at this?” I also reinforce that mistakes are how we learn and not something to avoid, as well as ensuring my course reflects opportunities to recover from mistakes and learn.

The third area is to help each student discover meaningful goals and create an action plan that will get them to the achievement of a future, desired end. This is as simple as asking students what is important to them and what kind of future they want to create, then offering our expertise to help them craft a realistic, step-by-step plan to get there. If students understand what college can do for them, how long it will take, the cost versus benefits, and that there are many resources/people to help – it will go a long way to increase the grit, tenacity, and perseverance required to succeed.

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**Dr. Marianne Auten** is passionate about the new research on the brain and learning, particularly the non-cognitive factors in academic success. She presents regularly on the topics of mindset, strengths, grit, fear of failure, finding purpose, and goal achievement. She has been teaching and counseling at Paradise Valley Community College in Phoenix, Arizona since 1990. Marianne holds a Master of Counseling degree from Arizona State University and a doctorate in Higher Education and Adult Learning from Walden University. Her doctoral research topic was “Helping Educators Foster A Growth Mindset in Community College Classrooms” (2013).



**QUICK TAKES**  
**Highlights**  
**from the Field**

**Strategies to Improve Academic Achievement in Secondary School Students: Perspectives on Grit and Mindset**

by Susan Polirstok

*Founded upon a detailed review of the literature, the author examines student academic performance from the perspectives of grit and mindset, and reviews those factors that make learners resilient, persistent, and willing to take on academic challenges. A study of the work of Duckworth on persistence and resilience and Dweck on mindset provides a foundation for teaching strategies and materials to help students increase persistence and build a growth mindset.*

Access this work here:  
<http://bit.ly/2EJVuB>

**Promoting Grit, Tenacity, and Perseverance: Critical Factors for Success in the 21st Century**

by The U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology

*This brief reviews how we can best prepare students to thrive in the 21st century since conventional educational approaches are not sufficient. The authors look at a core set of noncognitive factors—grit, tenacity, and perseverance—essential to an individual's capacity to strive for and succeed at long-term goals and to persist in the face of challenges, and stress it is the responsibility of educators to design learning environments that promote these factors.*

Access this work here:  
<http://bit.ly/1zdFyib>



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**Grit vs GRIT: It's a Matter of Quality** (continued from page 1)

been; and (2) how positively or negatively adversity has impacted the person.

*Whereas grit is about quantity, GRIT is about quality: (1) good vs. bad; (2) effective vs. ineffective; and (3) strong vs. weak.*

Whereas *grit* is about quantity, GRIT is about quality: (1) good vs. bad; (2) effective vs. ineffective; and (3) strong vs. weak. Good, effective, and strong GRIT helps ensure students are completing the right goals, in the right ways, for the right reasons.

According to Dr. Stoltz, good GRIT means striving for goals that enrich others or yourself in a manner that reduces the potential burdens one puts on others. Bad GRIT relates to intended or unintended consequences of “me at your expense” in order to accomplish a particular goal. A student with good GRIT can pursue a goal while having a positive impact on themselves or others. A student who dominates a classroom to the point other students do not participate is a simple example of bad GRIT.

Effective GRIT means to continually learn, grow, strive, and evolve. It also means knowing when to quit. Yes – quitting is an act of GRIT! Ineffective GRIT either means pursuing the wrong things in the wrong ways or continuing to pursue the right things in a way that no longer works.

Strong GRIT is the exceptional capacity to get things done even if it means sacrificing or struggling to do so, such as the gritty student who maintains a 4.0 GPA while coping with significant life challenges. Finally, weak GRIT is the lack of capacity to do what it takes to make things happen, especially in the face of adversity, regardless of the real magnitude (great or small) of that adversity.

Community colleges across the country want more students to graduate with a degree or certificate. Lone Star College-Tomball is no different. However, we also want our students to be successful even if they do not finish a degree or certificate. Therefore, in fall 2014, we started exploring grit. Through a bit of luck and serendipity, we partnered with Dr. Stoltz, through Pearson, in fall 2015 and evolved from grit to GRIT.

First, we tested the impact of GRIT on student success. With Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval and using experimental design methods, all LSC-Tomball full-time faculty (approximately 100) were randomly assigned to an experimental group (With GRIT) or a control group (No New GRIT). Those assigned to the “With GRIT” group infused GRIT into their courses by showing a 15-minute video of Dr. Stoltz that explained GRIT, “grittified” at least one assignment, and encouraged their students to take Dr. Stoltz’s valid and reliable GRIT Gauge™ at the beginning of the semester and again at the end of the semester. “With GRIT” faculty were also encouraged to go beyond the minimum and infuse GRIT as intensively as they wished; however, the degree to which With GRIT faculty used GRIT beyond the minimum requirements was not controlled. “No New GRIT” faculty were also asked to have students complete the GRIT

Gauge™ at the beginning of the semester and again at the end of the semester. They otherwise conducted classes in standard fashion.

Briefly stated, the results of this study indicate that GRIT is significantly correlated with standard measures of student success, including grade point average, credits earned, completion and persistence. Our research also shows that GRIT can be grown during a standard academic semester and that classes taught “With GRIT” have a higher completion rate. So compelling were the results that we have continued our partnership with Pearson and Dr. Stoltz. We continue to offer Dr. Stoltz’s GRIT Gauge™ to our students at the beginning and end of each semester. To date, approximately 3,000 LSC-Tomball students have completed the GRIT Gauge™.

In addition to providing students with the GRIT Gauge™, we are infusing GRIT into the classroom and expanding GRIT throughout other areas of the college, including TRiO, advising services, and Title V grant activities. Faculty are voluntarily participating in a locally-developed GRIT Certification program. Courses taught by GRIT Certified faculty will be denoted as “grittified” in the course schedule starting Fall 2018. Additionally, LSC-Tomball has twice hosted an annual GRIT Summit to share student GRIT stories, teach others how to infuse GRIT into the culture and curriculum, and to demonstrate GRIT in action.

*Our research also shows that GRIT can be grown during a standard academic semester and that classes taught “With GRIT” have a higher completion rate.*

Distinguishing GRIT from grit matters a great deal in this evolving dialogue about the concept and its potential impact on student success. It is critical to uphold the qualities of GRIT over the quantity of grit. After all, our work as educators is beyond ensuring students earn a degree or certificate. Our real work is about helping students rise to a challenge, overcome adversity, and accomplish their worthy goals in good, effective, strong ways...even after they finish their community college education.



**Dr. Lee Ann Nutt, EdD**, serves as President at Lone Star College-Tomball, located in Tomball, Texas, which is one of six comprehensive community colleges in the Lone Star College System northwest of Houston. Prior to assuming the presidency in February 2015, Dr. Nutt served as Acting President for several months and Vice President of Instruction (VPI) at the same institution since June 2011. Prior to joining Lone Star College, she served in multiple administrative positions at North Central Texas College, in Gainesville, Texas, for over 12 years, including Dean of Continuing Education, Provost, and Vice President of Instruction. Dr. Nutt currently teaches Quantitative Research Methods for Ferris State University’s DCCL program. Previously, she taught research methods, writing and research, and introductory statistics for Lubbock Christian University. A Texas Tech Red Raider, Dr. Nutt earned her BBA, MEd, and EdD in Higher Education Administration from that university. Her doctoral research focused on career satisfaction of female presidents of U. S. higher education institutions.