

## **Leadership Lessons in Six Seasons of Community**

### **Abstract**

During five seasons of the NBC sit-com *Community* (2009-2015) and an additional season on Yahoo (2016), Americans discovered the academics and antics of Greendale Community College. The TV show centered around seven diverse students who formed a study group in the pilot episode and eventually morphed into a tight-knit family that worked and played together beyond graduation. Five student development theories are relevant to *Community*. Come to this session to see how lessons will be applied to examples from the show.

### **Program Description and Outline**

#### **Goals of the presentation.**

The primary goal of this presentation is to bring student development theories to life! Many times, we look for ways to bridge theory to practice. This session looks to bridge theory to pop culture. It will provide attendees a deeper understanding of five student development theories: Sense of Belonging, Theory of Student Departure, Notions of Challenge and Support, Grit, and the Theory of Student Involvement.

#### **Description that provides detailed information about your program.**

The premise of this chapter is to relate five student development theories to the TV show *Community*. The TV show will be examined through each of 5 lenses: Sense of Belonging, Theory of Student Departure, Notions of Challenge and Support, Grit, and the Theory of Student Involvement. Examples from the show (shown via video clips during the presentation) will be applied to each theory/framework. A brief description of each theory and the example follows here:

**Theory 1: Sense of Belonging** → “In terms of college students, sense of belonging refers to students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by and important to the group (e.g., campus community) or others on campus (e.g., faculty, peers)” (Strayhorn, p. 3). “Sense of belonging is relational, and thus there’s a reciprocal quality to relationships that provide a sense of belonging. Each member benefits from the group and the group, in a sense, benefits from the contributions of each member... Under optimal conditions, members feel that the group is important to them and that they are important to the group. The group satisfies the needs of the individual – in exchange for membership, they will be cared for and supported” (Strayhorn, p. 3).<sup>1</sup>

Students “who do not have a sense of belonging complain that their college experience is like ‘stopping by the mall’ to get what they need on their way to somewhere else” (Jacoby & Garland, 2004, p. 65).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. New York: Routledge.

<sup>2</sup> Jacoby, B. & Garland, J. (2004). Strategies for enhancing commuter student success. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*. (6)1: pp. 61-79.

### **Example from the TV show [Season 4, Episode “Heroic Origins”]**

Speaking of “stopping by the mall,” in season 4, the study group had a flashback to when they decided to attend Greendale Community College. It all started at a frozen yogurt shop in a shopping mall four years prior to this episode. The seven students all decided to attend Greendale based upon flyers that were distributed by Ben Chang and Dean Pelton at that mall. All of the individuals were lost at the mall before they found Greendale, and with that college, they found their study group and a sense of belonging that was previously missing from their lives.

### **Theory # 2 → Tinto’s Theory of Student Departure**

The first six months of college are an especially important period in student persistence and completing the first year is more than half the battle in persistence to the Bachelor of Arts degree (p. 439).<sup>3</sup> “Much of Tinto’s work centered on the fact that somewhere between 40-60 percent of all college students drop out of school before earning their degree. Tinto found that approximately 75 percent of those students who depart will leave during the first two years of college” (Strayhorn, 2013, p. 14).<sup>4</sup> Tinto’s theory argues that the process of student persistence/process of student departure is made up of distinct stages through which students typically pass through during their college careers.

### **Example from the TV show [Season 1, Episode “Modern Warfare”]**

Since the first six months of college are so important, this episode takes place during Season 1 of the series. During this episode, students really *incorporate into college* when Dean Pelton announces a “Paintball Assassin” competition. The entire campus participates in the competition and the study group forms a team against others. Greendale’s Glee Club, Chess Club, and a roller-skating team are all featured as communities within *Community*. Although Paintball Assassin is an extreme example of a game or ritual, it brought the groups together for the grand prize of priority registration next semester. Student retention efforts should be concentrated on the very early stages of the students’ college career. ... It is evident that the first year, indeed the first semester, is critical to the student’s eventual persistence until degree completion (Tinto, 1988, p. 451).

### **Theory #3: Sanford’s Notions of Challenge and Support**

Sanford (1962, 1966) suggests that academic and social development is a function of challenges in the environment balanced by a sufficient level of support.<sup>5 6</sup> “According to Sanford, when individuals are presented with a challenging situation or experience that has not previously been encountered, a new response emerges, thereby resulting in development. If too many new situations emerge without the appropriate support to mitigate these challenges, however, the individual may actually digress in his or

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<sup>3</sup> Tinto, V. (1988). Stages of student departure: Reflections on the longitudinal character of student leaving. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 59 (4). 438-455.

<sup>4</sup> Strayhorn, T.L. (2013). *Theoretical frameworks in college student research*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

<sup>5</sup> Sanford, N. (Ed.) (1962). *The American college: A psychological and social interpretation of higher learning*. New York: Wiley.

<sup>6</sup> Sanford, N. (1966). *Self and society: Social change and individual development*. New York: Atherton.

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her development. Therefore, it is the optimum balance of challenge and support that underlies development”<sup>7</sup> (Gardner, 2009, p.7).

The college experience is one of the greatest periods of growth in a young person’s life. For that growth to occur, college students need to be challenged and supported appropriately through a variety of experiences, both inside and out of the classroom. Some of these experiences may be unpleasant, like a failing grade in a class. Challenge and support does not imply that the student will never experience failure or negative consequences; it implies that there will be individuals and processes in place to support the student as they learn from the experience.<sup>8</sup>

### Example from the TV show [Season 2, Episode “Advanced Dungeons and Dragons”]

During seasons 1 and 2, the study group uses the unfortunate nickname “Fat Neil” for an overweight student at Greendale. Due to ongoing ridicule by his fellow students, it is revealed that Neil is on the brink of suicide. When Neil offers Jeff his old D&D books since Neil “wouldn’t need them anymore,” the study group puts their hearts and souls into helping Neil become happier by taking part in a game of D&D.

Throughout the process, Neil realizes he has friends as well as a reason to live by attending Greendale. Neil comes out on top, even teaching Pierce a lesson about himself, something the group and thus far failed to do.

Too much challenge = overwhelming

Too little challenge = debilitating

Sanford’s theory encourages us to strive to restore equilibrium. The study group has adequately restored peace and happiness in the life of another student while playing Dungeons and Dragons only for his benefit. It is a true episode of love and emotion.



**Theory #4: Grit** → Academic preparation is important to success in college, but only 10 % of those who leave college early have GPAs below 2.0.<sup>9</sup> Therefore, most students are not leaving college because of the rigor or the academic challenge. One character trait that has received an increasing amount of attention in educational discourse and practice is **grit**, defined in the literature as perseverance and passion for long-term goals in the face of obstacles (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).<sup>10</sup> Consistent with what most college professors or graduates may note as important to successfully

<sup>7</sup> Gardner, S. K. (2009). The Development of Doctoral Students--Phases of Challenge and Support. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 34(6). DOI: 10.1002/aehe.3406

<sup>8</sup> Blog: I’m Joe Boe. Dean of Richmond College, the college for men at University of Richmond. Link: <https://imjoeboe.wordpress.com/2011/04/28/challenge-support/>

<sup>9</sup> Almeida, D. J. (2016). Understanding Grit in the Context of Higher Education. In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (pp. 559-609). NY: Springer.

<sup>10</sup> Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087–1101.

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completing college, grit has been characterized as “the capacity to sustain effort and interest in projects that take months or even longer to complete” (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009, p. 166).<sup>11</sup>

Grit is highly correlated with the personality trait of conscientiousness (Duckworth & Quinn, 2009). Despite the similarity of these two constructs with regards to short-term accomplishments, what makes grit distinct from conscientiousness is grit’s relevance to particularly long-term endeavors (Duckworth et al., 2007). (Taken from Almeida, 2016, p. 568).

### **Example from the TV show [All episodes featuring Shirley]**

To be sure, many of the students on *Community* should not have made it to college, much less persisted through to graduation. Several of the individuals of the study group and the greater Greendale campus are adult returning students with families, responsibilities, mortgages, and careers. In particular, Shirley Bennett is a key member of the study group who is juggling numerous responsibilities. She enrolled at Greendale Community College not long after her divorce due to her husband’s infidelity with a stripper. Now a single mom of two boys, her goal at Greendale is to take business courses to open a restaurant or bakery. In her sophomore year she reconciled with her husband and had another child with him. During her third year at school, Shirley remarried Andre and also started a business called “Shirley’s Sandwiches” with her fellow study group member Pierce Hawthorne. After four years, she graduated with honors and earned that business degree. Shirley remained on campus after graduation to run her sandwich shop, but during season six, Shirley's father became sick and she left for Florida to take care of him. Shirley handed over the reins of the sandwich shop to Britta and her old study group's care in her absence.



Despite the challenges through the years, Shirley is determined to finish her degree and become a success at business. She never gives up, and it is her grit that is evident in every episode of *Community*. She rises above the challenges to ultimately succeed. She is a hero for moms and entrepreneurs everywhere.

**Theory # 5: Astin’s Theory of Student Involvement** → Involvement is the amount of physical and psychological energy that the student devotes to an academic experience.<sup>12</sup> According to the theory, the greater the student’s involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development (Astin, 1984, p. 308).

“Thus, a highly involved student is one who, for example, devotes considerable energy to studying, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations, and interacts frequently with faculty members and other students. Conversely, a typical uninvolved student neglects studies,

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<sup>11</sup> Duckworth, A.L. and Quinn, P.D. (2009) Development and Validation of the Short Grit Scale (Grit-S), *Journal of Personality Assessment*, (91) 2, 166 - 174.

<sup>12</sup> Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), 297-308.

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spends little time on campus, abstains from extracurricular activities, and has infrequent interaction with faculty members or other students. These hypothetical examples are only intended to be illustrative. There are many other possible forms of involvement” (Astin, 1984, p. 297).

**Example from the TV show [Season 3, Episode “Pillows and Blankets”]**

There is no doubt watching *Community* that the study group is comprised of highly involved students. While on campus, they play paintball, sing, dance, eat, study, and party together. In season 3, they build blanket forts together. A documentary crew was filming the attempt by Troy to beat the Guinness World record for the world’s largest blanket fort. Troy and Abed, who are usually the best of friends, build competing blanket forts; Troy demands that Abed surrender his space. Abed refuses and at midnight Troy’s “Blanketsburg” attacks Abed’s “Pillowtown.” With war officially declared, the rest of the study group assumes roles in the conflict. Hilarity and camaraderie ensue.

**Evidence of the conceptual foundation for proposal content including ways the program content is grounded in research, relevant experience, a cogent model, or appropriate theory. Please include references to the primary sources that are the foundation of your presentation.**

Almeida, D. J. (2016). Understanding Grit in the Context of Higher Education. In *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research* (pp. 559-609). NY: Springer.

Astin, A. W. (1984). Student involvement: A developmental theory for higher education. *Journal of College Student Personnel*, 25(4), 297-308.

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Duckworth, A. L., Peterson, C., Matthews, M. D., & Kelly, D. R. (2007). Grit: Perseverance and passion for long-term goals. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 92(6), 1087–1101.

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Gardner, S. K. (2009). The Development of Doctoral Students--Phases of Challenge and Support. *ASHE Higher Education Report*, 34(6). DOI: 10.1002/aehe.3406

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Strayhorn, T. L. (2012). *College students' sense of belonging: A key to educational success for all students*. New York: Routledge.

Strayhorn, T.L. (2013). *Theoretical frameworks in college student research*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

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Tinto, V. (2016). Through the Eyes of Students. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice*. DOI:10.1177/1521025115621917.

### **Identification of the program format (e.g., lecture, panel, debate)**

The session will be a combination of lecture, video clips, small group activities, and discussion!

### **Methods for participant involvement**

The primary activity will be a “create your own leadership lessons for department chairs” from which I will divide the audience into teams of 7 or 8 (depending on the size of the group). Each person on the team will be one of the study group members and will role play that cast member in the group:

Annie: Notetaker and timekeeper

Jeff: Leader and Group Facilitator

Troy & Abed: Presenters

Shirley: Engineer of Research

Britta: Devil’s advocate

Pierce: Thinker, processor, wise counsel

Dean: Cheerleader

The goal of the group activity is for the ACC teams to create different leadership lessons that could be applied to *Community*. It is also to brainstorm new ways that *Community* could be used in higher ed situations and faculty/staff meetings.

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Note to program chair: If it is possible, I would LOVE to have a “Parallel Plenary” session on Friday morning of the conference. They are 2.5 hours (plus 30-minute break) long so that I could really provide an in-depth session on theory to pop culture!

### **Learning Outcomes**

1. Participants will use examples from the TV show Community to analyze student development theories.
2. Participants will leave with tangible pop culture resources for future references in classes, staff meetings, and student affairs events on their own campuses.
3. Participants will practice the skills of bridging theory to practice.
4. Participants will learn and have fun doing it!

### **Conclusion**

You've just stopped being a study group.  
You've now become something unstoppable.  
I hereby pronounce you a COMMUNITY.  
- Jeff Winger  
Pilot Episode of Community