

## Institute considers hope as a scientific discipline

**W**hat is "hope"? Why do some people seem to have a lot of it, and others just a little? And why are there so many people who do not possess any sense of hope?

Those questions and a lot more were explored by 50 educators, academics, policymakers, youth-development professionals and recreation leaders from across the country during a one-week National Youth Development Master's Institute co-sponsored by Kids at Hope and Arizona State University.



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Institute participants represented cities as large as Chicago and Phoenix, as well as communities as small as Pittsburg, Kan., and Horton-

ville, Wis., in order to understand where hope is found or lost. Leading the discussion was Shane Lopez, a world authority on hope. Lopez is an associate professor at the University of Kansas and a senior scientist for the Gallup organization.

Scholars define hope as a way of thinking about one's goals in which one has the perceived capacity to come up with pathways (strategies) to achieve such goals as well as mental energy to use those pathways. Hope is responsible for success or failure, happiness or depression, and optimism or pessimism.

Yet, as a scientific discipline, we have been less concerned about understanding hope than we have about understanding crime, pathology, human deficits and weaknesses.

According to researchers and practitioners from the newly emerging field of positive psychology — of which Lopez is a recognized leader — most people focus their energies to better understand weaknesses and their resources trying to repair these flaws. The end result is that we neglect the power of focusing and reinforcing on the hundreds or thousands of strengths that can support a sense of fulfillment and achievement.

Don Clifton, co-author of *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, and a men-

tor of Lopez, suggested, "What would happen if we studied what is right with people?" This question has become the driving force energizing a world movement to understand hope and its subsets of success, strengths and optimism. Those in attendance at the recent Master's Institute had a front-row seat to this discussion.

Exploring the field of hope offered institute participants a fuller understanding and value offered by this new field. Of consequence was the research that individuals with high hope vs. low hope remain energized after major health procedures or surgery. Carefully controlled studies have also demonstrated that high-hope scores for students entering college were a better predictor than standard national tests, such as the SAT, or grade-point averages. Additionally, those students who scored high in hope scales relative to students scoring low were more likely to have graduated during a six-year period.

Throughout the institute, participants also interacted with researchers from the fields of education, social work and criminology to test these concepts.

The big question derived from the institute was, what can we do with such information to support and improve our own lives and the lives of the children we serve?

The answer is, a lot! First, we must change our thinking. We need to shift from an obsession with pathology to a commitment to the study of hope as a strength needed by all.

The most poignant understanding from this important institute was the conclusion that hope is life's activating variable — or as researchers would define it, an "intervention." Without hope, nothing else seems to matter. Doesn't it make sense, then, that we spend time and resources investigating and practicing this potent concept along with its associated elements, ultimately in an effort to offer the opportunity for all children to be instilled with it?

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