The StrengthsQuest™ Guidebook: Introducing Strengths-Based
Development and StrengthsQuest to Higher Education Leaders
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Assisting College Students to Discover and Develop Their Strengths: The StrengthsQuest program

Forward

"As educators, our challenge and our joy is helping students move to levels of personal excellence by becoming the persons they have the potential to be. And the marvelous thing about this perspective is that in the process we also move toward our own levels of personal excellence, becoming the persons we have the potential to be."
— Chip Anderson

"In the context of strong mentoring relationships and a stimulating, safe environment, capitalizing on human strengths enhances motivational forces and promotes academic achievement and personal adjustment, leading to college retention and civic engagement." — Shane Lopez

We in higher education are all deeply interested and committed to assisting students to invest their talents, time, and treasures so that they will bring them a life of success, meaning, and fulfillment. We often start by thinking about who students are — their sense of self, their talents, strengths, and purpose in life. We help students focus on such questions as: "Who am I?" and "How do I best contribute to make this a better world?"

In asking these questions, we desire to assist students to think and reflect on their talents and strengths as central to their own development and growth. Similarly, we want faculty and professionals in Student Affairs to create a community that will focus on helping students develop to their fullest potential. We think students thrive best in an environment that enables them to discover their strengths, by listening to who they really are and want to be and do in life, reflecting and talking to others about their aims in life and personal values, and taking action, i.e., becoming engaged in college by practicing and developing their talents and strengths. In short, college is the place where students are to **discover, develop, and apply their talents** to become the whole persons they are meant to be.

In doing so, we know that college leaders can also grow and develop as effective teachers, models, mentors, and fellow travelers in the students' journey through college. We also assume that they, like students, find meaning and purpose in life when they know who they are and become engaged to this world by using their talents and strengths to create a campus community that fosters student development. To do so then, leaders also need to become self aware of their strengths and

> **"It takes a whole campus of whole persons to develop whole students."**

opportunities to contribute, better mange themselves, and assist others by leading them to know and use their strengths — investing their own time, talents, and treasures in meaningful ways. In short, leaders need to create an environment that helps their colleagues, students, and themselves to effectively discover, develop, and apply their strengths.

The Purpose of This Guidebook

We have written this Guidebook for leaders in higher education who have an interest in and commitment to assisting students in their personal and professional development during their collegiate years. College students arrive on their campuses with potential — talents and gifts — and a willingness to explore, develop, and grow. But they need assistance in their collegiate journey to discover, develop, and apply their talents so they can reach their potential in their personal lives and in their careers. We are interested in collaborating with campuses that desire to have a student-centered, student-focused campus community, creating an environment that guides students to discover, develop, and apply their talents.

In this Guidebook we describe a number of ways that The Gallup Organization can become an effective partner with college leaders to provide a challenging but supportive collegiate environment that will assist students in their journey throughout their college days. For us, this journey begins with helping students gain a better, deeper, and richer understanding of who they are and can become. We use the concept of strengths as the core idea in helping students in their journey. In short, we begin with self-knowledge and awareness of one's strengths and then design programs both in the curriculum and co-curriculum that help students build on their identified talents.

Why do we start with the individual student? We begin with the student for several reasons. First, the major goal of a college education throughout its history has always been one of helping students "know thyself." Students come to college with potential, but often undeveloped or at least not yet fully developed, and during college they have opportunities to explore, to experiment, to learn, and develop in ways that prepare them for life and a career. Second, those who can learn what is meaningful to them, rewarding to them, and reflective of their desires and inner self, are more apt to be engaged. Thus, knowing one's strengths has a strong motivating factor. Third, persons who build on their strengths are more likely to be successful in what they pursue. The Gallup Organization has concluded from its study of more than two million adults from virtually every profession, career, and field of achievement that top achievers understand their talents and strengths, and build their lives upon them. That is,

persons are more apt to perform at levels of excellence if they are using and applying their strengths in their engagement. Chip Anderson states it this way: "The best of the best build their lives around their talents," and "The best of the best invent ways of developing and applying strengths in areas where they want to improve, achieve, and become more effective" (2004, p. 7).

Although we begin with students, we do not wish to stop there. We recognize the importance of the social environment — all the members of the college campus community — for the students. We consider the development of all members — staff, leaders, and faculty on the college campus — to be important in creating a culture and community that focuses on the strengths of students. Thus, we offer programs not only for students but also for those adults who are mentors and models for students in their journey. As we describe later, we offer programs for staff development using the same basic strategy — begin with helping people better know who they are, particularly their strengths, and provide programs and consultative services to assist them in their development.

Theoretical Perspective of StrengthsQuest

StrengthsQuest (SQ) has a theoretical foundation that is closely linked to and exemplified by the Positive Psychology perspective (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). "Positive Psychology is an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions" (Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson, 2005, p. 410). This perspective begins with what is positive and normal about people — rather than focusing on their deficiencies or what is abnormal about them — and focuses on a person's wellbeing. "When we think about the full development of students as persons, we must think in terms of students developing strengths and learning how to apply them" (Anderson, 2004, p. 66).

This perspective is also grounded in good educational practices. "The strengths-based approach to maximizing student success, though grounded in historical educational practices, also is built on two modern-day American educational principles: *measurement* of achievement, strengths, and determinants of positive outcomes and *individualization*, educational professionals spontaneously thinking about and acting upon the interests and needs of each student and systematically making efforts to personalize the learning experience" (Lopez, 2004, p. 1). It focuses on the environmental conditions of fostering positive characteristics and well being. The environment needs to be an "enabling environment," i.e., a positive organization (Avolio and Luthans, 2005).

Finally, this perspective reinforces a view of student development that is inclusive. It can be interpreted in terms of career success and by a life of meaning and purpose (Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward, 2006). It centers on the challenge of helping persons to achieve success in their career and living a life that brings joy and meaning from their personal investment of their time, talents, and treasures.

More specifically, the SQ Program is based on six principles of human nature and behavior (Chip Anderson, 2004). They are:

- You have a group of talents within you.
- Your greatest talents hold the key to high achievement, success, and progress at levels of personal excellence.
- Becoming aware of your talents builds confidence and provides a basis for achievement.
- Learning how to develop and apply strengths will improve your levels of achievement.
- Each of your talents can be applied in many areas including relationships, learning, academics, leadership, service, and careers.
- As you develop and apply strengths, your achievements will increase and you will experience greater and more frequent successes.

Talents and Strengths

The framework of the StrengthsQuest program is built on two concepts — talents and strengths. "A strength begins with a talent […] a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied. A great number of talents naturally exist within you, and each of them is very specific […] Your talents empower you. They make it possible for you to move to higher levels of excellence and fulfill your potential. […] A talent represents a capacity to *do* something" (Clifton and Anderson, 2002, P. 6). All of us have a unique combination of talents that we can discover and develop to reach our potential.

Thus, strengths are developed talents. Strengths are neither innate nor totally dependent on our heredity, but can be discovered and developed so that they bring us stability and persistence. "A strength is the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity. […] strengths are produced when talents are refined with knowledge and skill" (Clifton and Anderson, 2002, p. 8).

We focus on talents and strengths because we argue that students who discover and develop their talents into strengths are able to live and perform at a level of excellence — both in terms of career success and living a fulfilling life. Living at a level of excellence in life is challenging, but it can be made more fulfilling and meaningful if one systematically and consistently develops and uses his or her talents. Thus, we consider good student development in terms of investing oneself — one's talents, time, and treasures — into becoming the person one desires and chooses to become. As Clifton and Anderson state, "In a sense, the development and application of strengths generates a feeling that you are fulfilling your personal destiny" (2002, p. 9). "Your strengths quest is a lifelong adventure. Each of the three aspects — discovery, development, and application — will continue throughout your life. This exciting and fulfilling process should bring you a lifetime of great satisfaction and joy" (p. 14-5). Later we describe the structure of a campus-centered initiative to help students discover, develop, and apply their strengths.

Benefits of Using the StrengthsQuest Program on Your Campus

If you desire to invest some of your resources into a SQ program on your campus, you can think of the return of this investment by focusing on a number of benefits. From our experience with the SQ program, campuses that have used SQ have asked these questions: What are the potential benefits for students? To what end is this investment to achieve? Why invest in SQ?

We list 10 different potential benefits from an investment in the SQ program to help you focus on why you may want to implement the program on your campus. We encourage you to initially ask yourself if each of these uses helps you achieve your campus mission and goals. Then, ask how the SQ Program can be constructively integrated with the curricula and curricular activities on your campus to help fulfill your campus mission and goals.

- Assist students to become more self aware and accepting

  Do you desire to help students ask the question "Who am I?" and to assist them in gains of better self-acceptance, self-identity, and individuality?

- Assist students to better understand others for who they are and can become

  Do you desire to help students reduce bias and prejudices due to gender, race, and lifestyle, and to increase their tolerance and acceptance of others?

- Assist students to use their strengths to increase their learning and grades

  Do you wish to assist students to enhance their academic self efficacy, and to help them see their future with more hope, and to have a greater willingness to act on their strengths in college and beyond? Do you wish to help students better manage their weaknesses? Do you want to help students to be more involved in engaged learning?

- Assist students to understand their lives in terms of calling and vocation

  Do you wish to help students to understand why and how they can use their gifts and talents with and for a purpose?

- Assist students to be team members

  Do you desire to provide experiences for students to become more effective and productive team members, and to help them learn how to reduce conflict in group meetings?

- Assist students to become more effective leaders

  Do you want to provide experiences and assistance in helping students lead from their strengths?

- Assist students to increase their expectations of staying in school to graduate

  Do you desire to help students to increase their retention to complete their coursework and graduate?

- Assist students with selecting and determining career choices

  Do you wish to develop a more systematic approach to helping students make decisions about their careers?

- Assist students to improve their interpersonal relationships

  Do you desire to help students in relating with their roommate and college friends, parents, and adult authority figures, and with their significant others?

- Assist students to more readily become members of the campus community

  Do you wish to find ways to get students to feel like contributing members of the community, such as helping advisors and faculty build better relationships with students?

Description of the StrengthsQuest Talent Assessment Instrument

The Gallup Organization has studied human behavior for more than 70 years. Gallup has leveraged this deep understanding to develop measurement tools, intervention and training programs, and consultative and advisory services with one single purpose in mind: to help organizations and individuals maximize their performance. For college students, The Gallup Organization has designed an instrument and the accompanying talent development program that we refer to as StrengthsQuest.

The SQ instrument — the Clifton StrengthsFinder — consists of 180 paired comparison items that are classified into 34 groupings, called themes. Students take the instrument online, which takes about 30 minutes to complete. Students immediately receive a report that lists their top five themes of talent in the order in which they are most dominant for each individual. These 34 themes are presented below.

Achiever	Deliberative	Learner
Activator	Developer	Maximizer
Adaptability	Discipline	Positivity
Analytical	Empathy	Relator
Arranger	Focus	Responsibility
Belief	Futuristic	Restorative
Command	Harmony	Self-Assurance
Communication	Ideation	Significance
Competition	Includer	Strategic
Connectedness	Individualization	Woo
Consistency	Input	
Context	Intellection	

More than two million people have taken the Clifton StrengthsFinder over the past several decades. This instrument has been analyzed for technical psychometric characteristics, including validity and reliability. A continuous program of research is underway to determine the trustworthiness of SQ and its appropriate uses. In this Guidebook we can state that the reliability of SQ is sufficient for its use as a tool to help students in their development. Reliability refers to two related properties. The first is the internal consistency of the 34 themes; to what extent are the items correlated with and interrelated with the other items of the same theme? Is the theme a consistent integrated portrayal of the given talents? In general, all 34 themes have sufficient coherence to be used in helping students understand their talents. The second form of reliability is the consistency of the themes, i.e. to what extent are students answering the items in a similar way over extended periods of time? Students are somewhat consistent in their response over a six-week period, according to one study of college students (Schreiner, 2005).

The other major important characteristic is the validity of the results. Validity refers to the level of confidence one can have of the usefulness of the results for given purposes. What difference does it make for a student to know the results of her taking the SQ talent assessment? Of what use is it? Determining the validity of the results is an ongoing process, and is multifaceted. Gallup has conducted several studies to determine the relationship of SQ scores with measures of career interests, such as the Holland Vocation Preference Inventory and personality inventories such as the California Personality Inventory and the 16PF (Schreiner, 2006) to study its construct validity. Gallup has also investigated the positive impact on student participation in a SQ program on college retention. It has concluded that the effect of advising students with a strengths-based perspective, using the SQ as the provider of information about student abilities, results in more effective advising as measured by student satisfaction (Schreiner and Anderson, 2005).

Using a SQ Program to Foster Student Development

Helping students **discover, develop, and apply** their talents requires a total campus strategy. The Gallup Organization has designed the StrengthsQuest program to include four major components. The first three are services provided to the student under the direction and guidance of the local campus leaders. The last one is a unique set of activities designed and implemented by each campus in consultation with Gallup.

- Discover talents through the assessment.

  Students take an online talent assessment instrument, the Clifton StrengthsFinder, which reveals their greatest areas of talent

- Develop strengths by reading about strengths

  Students read the book *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond* by Donald Clifton and Chip Anderson, with Laurie Schreiner (2006) to help them understand their talents, direct them in their search for and development

of strengths, and provide them with insights and strategies on how they can apply their talents and strengths in academics, careers, and life.

- The StrengthsQuest Web site

  Students participate in this interactive Web site to learn more about their strengths, engage in selected learning modules, and participate in a discussion board.

- Campus programs

  In collaboration with Gallup, college campus leaders design and develop curricular and co-curricular programs (workshops, retreats, ongoing training sessions) to engage students in the discovery, development, and application of their strengths. Program components include:

  - first-year experience classes
  - relationship-building
  - leadership development
  - learning communities
  - fraternity and sorority groups
  - strengths-based advising
  - strengths-based teaching
  - career counseling
  - professional mentoring
  - peer mentoring
  - strengths-based academic classes
  - calling and purpose

These four interconnected activities of the SQ program all share a commonality — campus educators need to provide a challenging but supportive community that facilitates the "drawing out" of the students' inner talents, strengths, and gifts. Rather than thinking in terms of pouring "things" into students to reduce their deficiencies, they instead are engaged in helping students build on and nurture their interior selves — their values, talents, and sense of self. Leaders consciously connect the inner and outer life of students, linking being and doing and maximizing how being and doing feed off each other. Thus, leaders focus on creating the environment in which mentors and models provide the type of learning and development environment that will maximally **discover, develop, and apply one's talents.**

How Colleges Are Currently Using SQ

A number of institutions are currently using the SQ program in their curricular and co-curricular programs to assist students in discovering, developing, and applying their talents. We present here a sample of the wide range of practices and programs that campuses are now engaged in with SQ. Many of these campuses began their programs with a pilot program (e.g. leaders in student government use the SQ in their leadership retreats), and with more experience, the leaders of the campus often expanded the SQ program to include more students and integrate the program into more campus life activities and academic programs, like a freshmen year experience course.

The following is a partial list of participating institutions:

Abilene Christian University
Andrews University
Azusa Pacific University
Baptist College of Health Sciences
Baylor University
Bethel Seminary, St Paul
Biola University
Bryant & Stratton College (for profit chain)
California Baptist University
California Community Colleges
Creighton University
Dakota Wesleyan University
George Washington University, Business School
Grand View College
Houston Baptist University
Indiana Wesleyan University
Kaplan Higher Education Corp.
Lee University
Letourneau College
Lipscomb University
Maricopa Community Colleges (10 School System)
National FFA Organization
Ohio State University
Oral Roberts University
Pepperdine University
Rio Hondo College
Sam Houston University
Seward County Community College
Simpson University
State Universities of New York (SUNY)
Southern Methodist University
Temple University
Texas A&M College Station
Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi
Texas Christian University
Texas State Technical College Harlington
Texas Tech University
University of Kentucky
University of Minnesota
University of Missouri
University of Nebraska Lincoln
University of Pennsylvania
University of Texas Arlington
University Of Texas at San Antonio
University of Texas Austin, McCombs School of Business
University of Texas Tyler
Washington University (St. Louis)

The following is a short summary of the programs at a few institutions to illustrate the variety of programs already in progress.

Baylor University has been actively involved in the SQ program for the past three years. All entering freshmen take the SQ during orientation week. During the first weeks they meet in small groups, led by the staff of Student Affairs. Because their institutional mission is to help students better understand their calling and vocation in life (i.e., living a Christ-centered and purposeful life by using their gifts to help others), they use SQ to help students develop a vocabulary so they can discuss and share with others their dreams, goals, and plans to use their gifts and strengths. In short, it gives all students a common language to learn more about themselves and their colleagues.

The University of Nebraska-Lincoln College of Business Administration: Entering freshmen are active participants in a program designed by the college leaders, in consultation with Gallup.

Lee University in Cleveland, Tennessee has demonstrated a deep commitment to making its campus a "strengths-based campus." Incoming freshmen take the Clifton StrengthsFinder in an orientation course and then write a self-reflective paper on their Signature Themes. Students also have the opportunity to talk to one of 18 faculty who volunteer to give an hour of their time and attention to students about their strengths, often assisting them to think through their career options and help them think in terms of a vocation in life — which for them is founded on more deeply learning God's design for them in their life. This vocation-oriented approach to a career is deeply embedded in the culture of the campus. Faculty have also taken the Clifton StrengthsFinder and are engaged among themselves to learn more about their own gifts and how to effectively use them to help students find their calling and vocation.

At **Florida International University**, the staff in the Office of Student Affairs has been using SQ since 2000. All the professional staff, which numbers in the hundreds, have taken the Clifton StrengthsFinder and participated in workshops. SQ has been integrated in the Residence Life program in which all Residence Life Assistants engage in a series of sessions that focus on their talents and how they can use them in their work with students. A select number of students in a number of Living and Learning communities participate in programs that focus on leadership and team building.

At **Texas Tech University**, some of the entering freshmen have participated in the Freshman Seminar classes, in which they discovered and discussed their strengths in the seven-week course. Through this engagement students have reported that they feel a greater sense of belonging to the campus. Many students who came from small towns in western Texas were able to develop friendships based on their strengths. Last year Texas Tech held a strengths-based career fair, in which a large number of employers participated. Prior to the fair the university held seminars for students to help them reflect on and identify their strengths so they could be better prepared in the interviews and to better understand themselves as they begin to embark on their career. They were able to understand that they possessed talents and strengths that extended beyond the knowledge gained in their academic major. SQ turned out to be a great conversation starter for these students.

Using the SQ Program to Foster Staff and Faculty Development

One of our major arguments for partnering with institutions of higher education is that the campus environment is a very important setting for students to discover, develop, and apply their strengths. A campus needs to be student focused, creating an environment that will foster student growth and development. One important way to accomplish this goal is to assist the entire campus community — leaders, staff, and faculty — to apply their knowledge and skills and gain valuable experience in focusing on their own personal strengths so they can best help others to develop and use their talents. The Gallup Organization works collaboratively with campuses in three major areas:

- Discover, develop, and apply talents — Gallup can help leaders develop an individualized plan to enhance their effectiveness as a colleague to others in their institution

- Lead with strengths — Gallup can help leaders create an environment that focuses on strengths-based development. Leaders learn how to create a community that is based on strengths, first by learning about and leading from their own talents, then by learning how to lead based on the talents of those they lead.

- Create a strengths-based campus community — Gallup can assist institutions (departments, colleges) how to learn, plan, and implement strategies that enhance a strengths-based environment

Resources

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