



# StrengthsQuest™ on the College Campus: From Concept to Implementation

Written by Larry Braskamp

## Introduction

Students can advance their own development and growth by thinking, reflecting on, and applying their talents and strengths. Faculty and professionals in Student Affairs can create an academic community that effectively helps students develop their talents and strengths. 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 goals and personal values in life, 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 can **discover, develop, and apply their strengths** to realize their capabilities and become who they are meant to be.

The StrengthsQuest Program has been developed using a theoretical foundation that is closely linked 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 a person — instead of focusing on abnormalities or deficiencies — and zeroes in on the well-being of the person. It also focuses on the environmental conditions of fostering positive characteristics and well-being.

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 people achieve success in their career and living a life that brings joy and meaning from their personal investment of their time, talents, and treasures.

To assist potential college and university leaders and those now engaged in using StrengthsQuest, Gallup is engaging in a comprehensive program with four foci:

1. **Conceptual Framework:** Sponsoring scholarship that is primarily conceptual, with the goal of better understanding how StrengthsQuest relates to positive psychology and theories of student development and human development.
2. **Research:** Faculty and scholars are investigating the effectiveness of the StrengthsQuest interventions and programs on student learning and development, as well as the psychometric characteristics of StrengthsFinder.

3. **Documentation of Effective Practices to Discover, Develop, and Apply One’s Strengths:** Guidebooks and sourcebooks describe intervention strategies, programs, and practices that already have been developed and implemented at a number of colleges and universities.
4. **Consultative Services:** Gallup staff, faculty, and administrators with experience and expertise with StrengthsQuest provide workshops, onsite consultation, Webinars, and other services tailored to meet the unique needs of the institutions. Open enrollment workshops at locations throughout the United States are also available.

In this edition of the *Sourcebook*, we focus on the Conceptual Framework and the Documentation of Effective Practices.

## Conceptual Framework: Principles of Using StrengthsQuest to Enhance One’s Strengths, Talents, Gifts, Abilities, and Competencies

The StrengthsQuest Program is based on several major psychological, social, and organizational development theories. The StrengthsQuest principles can be classified into the following headings:

- definition and measurement of talents and strengths
- motivational implications
- role of environment in developing strengths and enhancing development and productivity

**“It takes a whole campus of whole persons to develop whole students.”**

### Definition and Measurement of Talents and Strengths

- Each of us has within us a range of talents, abilities, capabilities, and strengths.
- Our talents can be applied in many areas, including relationships with others, learning, academic studies, leadership, service, and careers.
- Each of us can find joy, meaning, and success in using our talents and strengths in our lives and our work.
- Developing our strengths rather than our weaknesses will result in a more productive and meaningful life.
- Developing our strengths is not limited to getting ahead in a career and in life, but rather recognizing the importance of contributing to the community in which one works and lives.

- Strengths themselves represent a continuum. All people have strengths, but in varying degrees. Strengths are not isolated, discrete abilities that are highly innate. Rather, strengths are developed when talents are combined with knowledge and practice. It is important to avoid dualistic thinking in terms of believing that if a person has strengths, by implication they have weaknesses that reflect a mindset of “fixed abilities.” A labeling mentality needs to avoid unintentionally preventing courage and effort and reducing one’s self-confidence to try new things, persevere, and have the tenacity to keep going when faced with hardships.
- In our thinking of human development, we stress that it can best incorporate a state rather than a trait mind-set. If we think in terms of a stable, innate, and inherent set of skills, abilities, and talents, then we focus on the trait interpretation. College is the place, however, where we help students develop their strengths, not just discover what they are good at or find meaningful. College is primarily a time of exploration for most college students.
- Talents and themes identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder instrument may be considered instrumental to achievement (schoolwork), as well as a desired end in and of itself (e.g., achievement — working diligently is an outcome of a liberal education). Thus, they are both a means and an end.

## Motivational Implications

- People are goal-directed and act upon their goals. Their actions and involvement are goal-directed.
- Building on one’s strengths is motivating.
- Becoming aware of our talents builds self-confidence and provides an intrinsic motivation for personally investing one’s own strengths.
- Discovering one’s strengths is a part of identity formation. As each person progresses through life, they engage in a journey of becoming their true self.
- Strengths as developed talents are an appropriate and useful way to conceptualize human development. It does not reinforce a perspective that some people are just born with talents and that they do not need to invest themselves — engage in hard work and practice — to exhibit and use their strengths.
- Applying one’s strengths in service to others is both self-filling and beneficial to society. Thus fostering development of strengths meets both the need to aim for common good as well as individual gain.

## Role of Environment in Developing Strengths and Enhancing Development and Productivity

- “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).

- “Colleges and universities that seek to take advantage of new research offered through the positive psychology movement will engage in at least three activities. These institutions will (1) study and understand successful students on campus; (2) establish a campus ethos that facilitates students’ discovery and understanding of their signature strengths; and (3) assist students in finding groups, organizations, or communities that they can serve with their signature strengths.” (Shushok and Hulme, 2006, p. 5).
- The campus environment needs to be an “enabling environment,” i.e., a positive organization (Avolio and Luthans, 2005). An effective environment is one that fosters positive characteristics and well-being. Question 3 of the Q12 instrument, “At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day,” reflects this perspective in a work setting, i.e., people are given many continuous opportunities to excel using their abilities, strengths, and interests. An effective environment is one that intentionally reinforces one’s strengths.
- Since achieving one’s potential requires an investment of one’s talents and time, the type of environment that is most effective is one that helps a person draw out their inner talents and potential strengths, and to lead a meaningful and purposeful life. Each person needs assistance — a challenging and socially supportive environment — in discovering, developing, and applying strengths throughout their life. More specifically the types of environmental conditions that both support and challenge students are critical. Question 11 of the Q12 survey, “In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress,” and Question 12, “This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow,” both illustrate the importance of an environment that fosters challenge and support from peers.
- A campus climate of challenge and support is needed to develop strengths in students. Creating dissonance and providing emotional support to help students master their goals are critical. If students only focus on talents and not effort, they we will not achieve excellence in the long run. Selection for “raw talent” is too narrow a view of development.
- Assisting persons on their journey in life and being an effective worker involves both a developmental and a selection approach. For an organization to be successful, it needs to “get the right people on the bus,” a basic characteristic of a “good to great” institution as proposed by Jim Collins in his book, *From Good to Great and the Social Sectors*. He recognizes the importance of selection, but he does not stop there. The culture of the institution is critical in going from good to great.
- Selecting a career is about the right fit, starting with what feels right and good with the person. Fit is an important factor in developing people and having a successful organization.

## Documentation of Effective Practices to Discover, Develop, and Apply One's Strengths in Student Development

Helping students **discover, develop, and apply** their strengths requires a total campus strategy. The Gallup Organization has designed StrengthsQuest to include four major components. The first three are services provided to students by Gallup 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 with possible consultation with Gallup.

### 1. Discover strengths through the StrengthsQuest instrument:

Students take an online assessment instrument that reveals the students greatest areas of strength.

### 2. Develop strengths by reading about strengths:

Students read the book, *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond*, by Donald Clifton, Chip Anderson, and Laurie Schreiner (2006), to help them understand their talents, direct them in their search and development of strengths, and provide them with insights and strategies on how they can apply their talents and strengths in academic, careers, and life.

### 3. 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.

### 4. Campus programs:

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

1. freshmen year experiences
2. relationship-building
3. leadership development
4. learning communities
5. fraternity and sorority groups
6. strengths-based advising
7. strengths-based teaching
8. career counseling
9. professional mentoring
10. peer mentoring
11. academic classes in the sophomore year
12. calling and purpose

These four interconnected activities and interventions of the StrengthsQuest program all share one commonality — campus educators need to provide a community of support and challenge 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 exploit their values, strengths, and sense of self. 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 strengths**. In this Sourcebook, we summarize how various campuses have used the StrengthsQuest program to enhance the development of students, using strengths as a core concept in planning the programs.

## Specific Initiatives Using StrengthsQuest on Campuses

In this part of the Sourcebook, we highlight five programs in which StrengthsQuest is an important part of the intervention strategy. The five programs are listed below. For each initiative, we provide two types of information to assist you in using StrengthsQuest on your campus. First, we present some perspectives — often in the form of advice from those with considerable experience using StrengthsQuest on their campuses. Second, we provide actual PowerPoint slides, course syllabus, and other materials to illustrate how campus leaders have designed the intervention on their campus. Each of these is presented with permission of the persons(s) authoring them, and you are welcome to adapt them for your local purposes. We kindly ask that you give proper attribution to the authors in your own use.

### 1. Student Leadership Development

#### In their own words:

- Barbara Herman and Cyndi Walsh of Texas Christian University (TCU)
- Students in leadership programs at TCU

#### Practices worth noting:

- TCU Center for Ethical Leadership & Responsible Citizenship

### 2. Career Counseling/Advising

#### In their own words:

- Roderick Hetzel, Susan Hetzel, and Matt Bonow of Baylor University
- Joe Johnston of University of Missouri

#### Practices worth noting:

- Lee University: Vocational Advising Template

### 3. Residence Halls

#### In their own words:

- Michael Shonrock of Texas Tech University
- Doug Hallenbeck, Missy Bryant, Emily Sandvall, and Leasa Kowalski of Southern Methodist University

#### Practices Worth Noting:

- Southern Methodist University

### 4. Freshmen-Year Experiences

#### In their own words:

- Debra White of Lee University
- Doug Hallenbeck, Missy Bryant, Emily Sandvall, and Leasa Kowalski of Southern Methodist University (SMU)

#### Practices Worth Noting:

- University of Nebraska Lincoln College of Business Administration 101 syllabus
- Gateway to University Success at Lee University
- Mustang Corral at Southern Methodist University

### 5. Creating a Strengths-Based Culture on Campus

#### In their own words:

- Michael Shonrock of Texas Tech University
- Carl Haynes of Tompkins Cortland Community College
- Doug Hallenbeck, Missy Bryant, Emily Sandvall, and Leasa Kowalski of SMU
- Jon Wergin of Antioch University

#### Practices Worth Noting:

- Tompkins Cortland Community College
- Greenville College (IL)

For each of these five interventions, we introduce the areas with some perspective from those who have been intimately involved as leaders and practitioners. Thus, we quote from our interviews with them, using the heading “In Their Own Words.”

#### 1. STUDENT LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

##### In Their Own Words: Barbara Herman and Cyndi Walsh of Texas Christian University

TCU is unique in that it places students leadership roles and allows students to run with them. Professional staff is there to assist. They are not there to direct. Adapted from the Social Change Model of Leadership (“lead self — lead others — lead change”) developed by Astin, we believe everyone has the potential to be a leader and everyone is called to lead in some way. The TCU philosophy of leadership is one in which the first step is self-awareness. In groups, we encourage students to talk about

what it is to be a leader and how to think critically. We want to get students motivated — to look at creative ways to get them invested. This is where leading others is an important part of the leadership process. Leading change, which is the third part of this model, is connected to positive social change and making your mark on the world.

Our purpose for using StrengthsQuest on TCU’s campus can be summarized by these points:

- The Strengths-Based Model supports/supplements current leadership theories and practices by:
  - a. Providing a framework for understanding self and understanding others.
  - b. Empowering and engaging students — StrengthsQuest is a way for students to talk about themselves to others. There is reluctance by some students to talk, openly and publicly about individual assets. Thus, StrengthsQuest provides an effective outlet for students to reveal their strengths to others and utilize them while working in groups.
  - c. Offering opportunities for authentic service and civic engagement — StrengthsQuest creates authenticity, greater interpersonal closeness, and cooperation, allowing individuals to use their leadership strengths to become more sensitive to injustices and abuses in the world and make a difference.
- Leadership is relational. StrengthsQuest provides students, faculty, and staff with a common language that allows for effective advising and mentoring to take place. It also allows for the development of an appreciation of individual strengths and strengths in others, resulting in increased effectiveness, less conflict, and greater cross-cultural relationships.
- StrengthsQuest helps students identify ways to become involved. It allows students to apply their strengths to any leadership opportunity, job, or career. Thus, we have been able to utilize StrengthsQuest in a multitude of ways on and off campus, including residential services, career services, orientation, and leadership training with individual student leaders, student organizations, academic classes, faculty, staff, and the community at large.

#### Students in Leadership Programs at TCU

- Our strengths come out in working in groups; thus, it’s important to have continual interaction with StrengthsQuest, including talking to other students about their own strengths and getting them to use them.
- We use the language of strengths in job interviews. It is a vocabulary that we have used to impress many interviewees because they realize our ability to know ourselves and to express ourselves. It allows us to demonstrate that we know what we are talking about.



- The campus culture at TCU is very supportive. It gives students the tools to find out who they are. There is a philosophy on campus of nurturing and helping students become leaders. It is not a place that forces you to develop in one way, but it provides a supportive community. It is hard to get lost in a crowd.

## Practices Worth Noting:

### TCU Center for Ethical Leadership & Responsible Citizenship ([www.sds.tcu.edu/leadership](http://www.sds.tcu.edu/leadership))

This center serves thousands of students, faculty, staff, and community members with skill-based, interactive training and resources that ensure thorough exposure to contemporary leadership topics and theories. The theme of the Center is “You’re a Leader.” Regardless of a student’s chosen major or career path, she has the ability to act and positively effect change in her community. A wide variety of programs are designed to help all participants live TCU’s mission statement: to educate individuals to think and act as ethical leaders and responsible citizens in the global community.”

## 2. CAREER COUNSELING AND ADVISING

### In Their Own Words: Roderick Hetzel, Matt Bonow, and Susan Hetzel of Baylor University

We discuss the feasibility of the rule to not go beyond the five strengths. Some students have interpreted this rule as if you either got it or you don’t, and it’s not seen as a continuum of strengths. Others of us have concluded that we all use every one of our 34 themes at some time in our lives; thus, we need to be more concerned about having it viewed not in terms of a dualistic black and white, but as an instrument for further exploration.

StrengthsQuest, as it fits into the counseling process, can be viewed as a way to create a mindset for people, a way to reframe the problems, and a way to recognize one’s relationships with others to encourage stories, meaning, and purpose.

### Joe Johnston of University of Missouri

The whole field of psychology appears to be being redirected toward an emphasis on the positive. More important, we are beginning to acquire the research evidence that it will return dividends we only thought would be the case. In career counseling, if we expect students to take charge of their own careers, we need help them see and act on what’s already going for them. That’s what will make the real difference in their lives.

The third edition of our textbook, *Career Counseling, Process, Issues, and Techniques* (Gysbers, Heppner and, Johnston) will prominently feature chapters on positive psychology and two instruments we believe will emerge as standards in the field: the Clifton Strengths Finder (Gallup) and the Insight Inventory (Handley). Both set up the counselor to reinforce what is going right for the client. In one sense, this is nothing new; it is, however, what is right. We want to be seen as helping clients to better see what they have going for themselves.

## Practices Worth Noting:

### Lee University: Strengths Vocational Advising Template

These suggestions cover a variety of scenarios. Choose according to the student need and the best fit with your style.

## Beginning the Session:

- I. Clarify the purpose of today’s appointment.
- II. Explain the Strengths Talk format and what you hope to accomplish.

## A Basic Strengths Talk

1. What are your top 5 themes? What is the “strength” of each one?
2. What does each theme enable and empower you to do? In other words, how have you seen these themes at work in your life? When/where have you recently used each theme?
3. What phrases in the theme paragraphs are true for you? (mark with highlighter)
4. Use the handout, “Taking Your Most Dominant Theme Seriously.”

Focus attention on the student. Listen. Take notes on the worksheet as the student speaks and give the student a copy of the worksheet with your notes at the end of the session. Place the original worksheet in the student’s file.

- a. Where are you most frequently using your most dominant strength?  
(areas, roles, responsibilities)
- b. How often are you using your most dominant strength?  
Weekly, daily, hourly...
- c. In what specific activities do you tend to use your most dominant strength?
- d. What are you doing to develop and nurture this theme?  
Stronger? More efficient? More flexible? More versatile?
- e. Where and how are you applying your most dominant theme to become more effective, efficient, or successful?
  1. interpersonal relationships?
  2. learning/academics?
  3. career preparation?
  4. spiritual life/relationship with God?
- f. How does this theme fit with your ideas of calling, leadership, and ministry?

## Further Advising Possibilities

### Self-Assessment: The Focus on You

1. What motivates you, gets you excited, or gives you a great deal of satisfaction?

2. What experiences have been your most fulfilling?
3. Tell me about a time in your life when you accomplished something you were proud of.
4. What themes fit you best? Which themes describe you best?
5. What do you excel at? What are you good at?
6. Which themes do you use most frequently?
7. Which themes make you most efficient with your time and energy?
8. In studying these top 5 themes, what have you learned about yourself?

## Your Themes and Academics

1. Which themes will help you most in college?
2. What do you seem to learn with the greatest of ease? Any connection to a theme?
3. What is your favorite type of assignment? Any connection to a theme?
4. What subjects do you most enjoy studying? Any connection to a theme?
5. What themes do you use in your academic work?
6. What kind of instructor do you learn best from? Why? Any connection to a theme?
7. What themes could you put to better use? Which themes need to be developed? How can you make that happen? (Refer to StrengthsQuest chapter on developing themes.)
8. Are there service opportunities or extracurricular activities that would allow you to develop your themes?
9. For application assignment: (using the worksheet)
  - a. What are two academic tasks you do with ease?
  - b. What are two academic tasks that you struggle with?
  - c. How do your themes relate to the “ease” category?
  - d. How could your themes help you with the struggles? Be specific with at least one strategy. Refer to StrengthsQuest text for ideas on improving academic performance with each theme.

## Your Themes and Relationships

1. How do you develop relationships?
2. What do your friends say they like best about you?
3. How can you explain your thinking and behaviors to your friends and family using a strengths vocabulary?

## Your Themes and Career Choices

1. Which careers seem most interesting and appealing to you? Why?

2. What is the best job or role you’ve ever had?
3. How do you get work done? What is your work style?
4. In what career would you be able to best use your strength themes?
5. Which theme is most important for you to be able to use every day in your career?
6. In what type of career do you think these themes will grow and develop?
7. Have you ever had a job where you asked yourself, “Do I really want to do this for the rest of my life?”
8. Where do you see yourself five years from now?
9. If you could set aside your fears and the expectations of others, what would you really love to do? (Handout: “I Was Born to Dream Big Dreams.”)

## Referrals

1. If their interests are unclear, refer them to take a career interest assessment, such as the Holland’s self-directed search.
2. If they are interested in their major, but are unsure about career possibilities, refer them to “What can I do with this major?” and/or CareerWay, which will link their interests, knowledge, skills, and values to career possibilities.
3. If they want to know more about a career field, refer them to our resource library.

## Goals & Actions

1. I want to do more of ... What theme would that use?
2. I want to do less of ... Why?
3. I want to know more about the \_\_\_\_\_ theme.
4. What’s one thing you’ve learned today?
5. What are one or two things you can do as a next step?

## Strengths & Calling

1. We believe that our strengths and talents were given to us by God.
2. We believe that they have the talents and strengths needed to achieve success in college. These strengths have the potential for success. The challenge is to learn how to best apply them.
3. Our strengths were not given to us just so that we can just achieve our own goals. Our strengths were given so that we can fulfill God’s purpose and plan for our lives. This is the concept of vocation, or calling.
4. The most basic issue in vocation is to establish a listening, obedient, love relationship with God. He first calls us into relationship with Himself.

5. Then God calls us to become the person He created us to be and to get done what He created us to do.
6. When Jesus was asked what was the most important commandment, He said: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor as yourself.” As we commit our lives to loving God and others with the abilities He has given us, the very best thing that we can ever do is to fulfill God’s purpose and plan for our lives.
7. We want you to think critically about your themes and their potential for development, and about their connection to your choice of major and career path.

### Ending the Session:

- I. Give an open invitation to return for further discussion.
- II. If you are referring them to someone else:
  1. Be very clear to the student about the purpose of the referral.
  2. Be very clear in your notes to the next advisor/counselor.
  3. If appropriate, pray with them.

### Taking Your Most Dominant Theme Seriously

#### I Believe My Most Dominant Strengths Theme Is \_\_\_\_\_.

1. Where am I most frequently using my dominant theme? In what areas, roles, responsibilities?
2. How often am I using this dominant theme? (minutes or hours per day/week?)
3. In what specific activities am I tending to use this dominant theme?
4. What am I doing to develop and nurture this dominant theme?
5. What am I doing to make it stronger, faster, more efficient, more flexible or versatile?
6. Where and how am I applying this theme to become more effective or successful?
  - a. interpersonal relationships
  - b. learning/academics
  - c. career preparation
  - d. spiritual life/relationship with God
7. How does this theme fit with my ideas of calling, leadership, and ministry?

### 3. RESIDENCE HALLS

#### In Their Own Words: Michael Shonrock of Texas Tech University

As we look at trying to make a difference in terms of recruitment and retention, especially retention of students, we want students to make some decisions their first year. For the second-year experience for students, we thought one of the areas that students gener-

ally don’t engage themselves in with respect to career development or career service is résumé development and getting ready for interviews. So, we want to touch their lives a bit earlier, their freshmen year, and get them to think about that.

As students move into the residence halls, the staff has already been trained. It’s fun for them because they have their strengths on their doors. Some are more engaged with it than others, as anything else, but this has also increased the ability for our career center to do more outreach. We spent about \$1.5 million totally renovating and developing a new career center at Tech within our division, and it’s located over by the high rise residence hall where all the freshmen live. We want it as close as we can because we’re trying to get students more engaged. We focus on strengths, not on weaknesses. We talk to a student one on one and say these are things that are your strengths; let’s focus on those types of things.

#### Doug Hallenbeck, Missy Bryant, Emily Sandvall, and Leasa Kowalski of SMU

When working with our residential pilot program, our highest level of success came when students received “multiple touches.” Only having strengths incorporated into one aspect of their university experience does not seem to achieve the desired results. Those who attended Corral, live in Boaz Hall, and take a wellness class with a strengths component, are the ones that have incorporated their strengths in a more meaningful way. Programming was typically most successful when we tied in outside departments.

We have the following pieces of advice and comments for other institutions:

- Begin with departmental (and broader support). Professionals need to know and understand their strengths before implementing with students.
- Pull together a group of students who can be advocates for strengths (orientation leaders, RAs, or others). On our campus, students won’t do it if it’s not cool. Make it cool with a few, and then let them spread the word to others.
- Trial and error. Things that we envisioned working did not always work as expected.

#### Practices Worth Noting:

##### Southern Methodist University

All Boaz Hall residents attending Mustang Corral were placed in the same Corral camp. Here they completed the assessment prior to attendance and participated in initiative orientation/activities during the Corral program. Residents who did not attend Mustang Corral where e-mailed a code and instructions; an orientation/activity session for these students was held separately, and all non-Corral students were invited to attend.

The Residence Hall Director and six student staff members (RAs) also took the StrengthsQuest assessment and participated in training targeted at helping them understand their strengths as well as how they would utilize strengths in the hall. Programmat-

ic initiatives within the residence hall continued after this point. Boaz Hall will be compared to another first-year community, McElvaney Hall, where students were not given the Strengths-Quest assessment and did not have the opportunity to participate in any programming or other implementation initiatives.

Programmatic efforts included:

- informal conversations with students about their strengths and how they identified with these
- brown bag lunch or coffee with an administrator who spoke to students about how the administrator utilized her strengths and lead a roundtable on students' questions pertaining to these strengths
- history of StrengthsQuest word-matching competition, played in teams
- discussion by Academic RA during academic programming about how to use strengths to study for exams
- reunion of students who attended Glen Lake Mustang Corral Camp

#### 4. FRESHMEN-YEAR EXPERIENCES

##### In Their Own Words: Debra White of Lee University

We want students who are undecided about a major, or those who have realized that their current major is not a good fit, to have a place to go to with a person available for one-on-one conversation. At Lee, the Center for Calling & Career is the place, and our Strengths Vocational Advisors (SVAs) are those resources. SVAs listen to the student's questions and concerns, focus on the student's strengths and interests, and do not advocate one academic program over another. We believe that by understanding and appreciating personal strengths, students can gain a clearer focus on their identity with a more specific direction for their future.

**Doug Hallenbeck, Missy Bryant, Emily Sandvall, and Leasa Kowalski of SMU**

We determined that we wanted to look at the possibility of implanting a strengths-based program for all students at Southern Methodist University. We decided to go in this direction for a few reasons. First, we wanted to provide a common language to help tie all students, faculty, and staff together. Second, we saw StrengthsQuest as a good tool in helping students define who they are and who they are going to be as they grow.

Finally, we believe that actively engaging students in a meaningful exploration of their strengths, Student Affairs Administrators have the potential to greatly impact students' engagement and involvement within the university. By increasing engagement and involvement in the college environment, students will see greater gains in their academic and personal success. Therefore, in fall 2006, we embarked on a pilot program to assess the success of StrengthsQuest to determine how we could use it further.

#### Practices Worth Noting:

##### University of Nebraska–Lincoln College of Business Administration 101 Syllabus

All students majoring in business in the College of Business Administration at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln take this 10-week course, receiving a one-hour academic credit. Students take the StrengthsQuest, read the StrengthsQuest book, discuss it in small groups, and write two self reflective papers, which are graded by the instructors. (See weeks 8 and 10 in the following illustrations.)

Week	Recitation Content	Assignment
Week Eight	Academic Advising Workshops  Talking it Over Diversity/Ethics StrengthsQuest Text (13) Discussion	Describe a situation that you have observed resulting from diversity in cultures that caused problems or confusion. What lessons regarding leadership and or strengths can be drawn from these experiences?
Week Ten	Exam 2 Journal II (completed in class)	Reflections on what it means. Who am I? Where am I going? How am going to get there?  Due Date: November 3

##### Lee University — Gateway to University Success Course Syllabus

This class meets once a week for a two-hour block.

##### Day 1: A Seamless Web

1. Ice breaker — Identify one positive thing about yourself, or something you enjoy doing.
2. Note these strengths-related benefits of a college education:
  - deeper sense of self-worth
  - development of personal identity
  - sense of mission in life
  - a vision for the future
  - greater understanding of other people and cultures
  - a meaningful contribution as a citizen



Day 2: Team Building — On this day, look for the 34 themes in action. They will serve as great examples for future class discussions.

Day 3: God's Work of Art/Strengths and Calling — This is a critical day to explain the concept and affirm the strengths of each theme. This class day is the most important one to lay a strong and clear foundation.

- Take time to emphasize the positive of each theme and learn the strengths vocabulary.
- Remember that some students will look at their themes as nothing special, or as definite weaknesses; they will need your help in seeing the positive in all of their themes.
- If the students really “get it,” they will be able to make strengths connections with future assignments and activities. If they don't value their themes, they will not be able to build a “seamless web.”
- An understanding of their personal themes will not all happen on one day; it's a developmental process.
- We are so deficit-minded that without your careful guidance, the StrengthsFinder Report can turn into a discussion of “the 29 themes I don't possess!”

I would strongly suggest that students have an **Individual Strengths Talk** with either the Instructor/Peer Leader/or SVA sometime during the fall semester.

Possible class activities:

1. Conduct a peer leader/instructor introduction of yourself through your themes.
2. Use “The Writing Challenge” — a good demonstration of strength/weakness.
3. The scriptural connections in devotions — strengths and humility, gratitude to God.
4. Possible activity: “My signature themes and how I use them.” Choose your top 2 themes and fill out the chart. Be prepared to share what you wrote.
5. Go quickly through the alphabetical list of 34 themes, speaking positively and affirming the potential for good. Students share what they wrote in the chart as you cover each theme. If no one has a particular theme, quickly share a positive example about it and move on. If the peer leader has been able to complete a theme chart for the class, it's good to hand those out for reference during this quick overview.
6. Consider the Creative Expression Assignment as part of the student's presentation on day 7 or 8.
7. Connections to Calling — Eph 2:10. Make the connection for them. Use the quotes from Answering the Call. Refer to the “Asking the right questions” section of Dr. Melton's article.

Day 4: Service Learning — Strengths Link — The call to “love others” through the gifts God has given us. I can see how my

theme of \_\_\_\_\_ could be used to serve in the following ways...

Which of your strengths do you think will have the biggest impact on your service experiences?

Day 5: Service Learning Project — Again, look for themes in actions. Some students will not be aware of their “natural occurrences.”

Day 6: The Successful Student

1. Encourage students to use the CC&C resources, especially if they are deciding on a major.
2. Develop an Action Plan from the StrengthsQuest Web site: Applying Your Strengths in Academics — there are action items for applying each theme to General Academic Life, Study Techniques, Academic Relationships, Class Selection, and Extracurricular Activities.
3. Strengths Connections to Academic Life: “Tasks I Do with Ease/Tasks with which I Struggle.”
4. Student Panel — What role do your strengths play in the activities in which you have chosen to be involved?

Strengths Link: Identify how one or two of your themes affect the way you manage time. (or study in a group, or read a chapter ...)

- What are two ways you can incorporate your strengths into developing strong academic skills?
- What are two ways your strengths will play into your campus involvements?

Day 7 & 8: Student Presentations — On these days affirm the themes you see (or have seen) in the presenters.

Day 9: Global Perspectives/Library

Day 10: Healthy Relationships — Our primary calling is to relationship with God.

Strengths Link: How has knowing someone's themes allowed you to better understand them, and better communicate with them? What's the impact of seeing others through strengths-colored glasses?

Day 11: Advance Class Selection — Strengths Link: How does your major connect to your strengths?

Strengths Vocational Advisors are available for appointments, especially for the undecided, the undeclared, or the simply confused!

Day 12: Service Project — Did the service opportunities this semester connect to your sense of mission, purpose, calling? Did you come to better understand yourself and your strengths and abilities through these opportunities to serve?

Day 13: Peer Leader Appreciation Day — Celebrate the strengths of your Peer Leader(s). Give examples of their effective use of their signature themes this semester.

## **Mustang Corral at SMU**

This year, all-new students attending Mustang Corral took the assessment (approximately 700 students). All students living in Boaz Hall, a first-year residence hall, also took the assessment. There are several classes that utilize this tool — Orientation Leadership Institute (OLI), Wellness, Greek Leadership Class, classes within Cox School of Business — to name a few. We also have a variety of clubs and organizations utilizing this assessment with their executive boards. Campus Offices (Student Accounts Department, Bursars Office, etc.) have also requested to take this assessment and have asked New Student Programs to facilitate their staff members through the personality tool.

This year, we used the StrengthsQuest assessment in place of another personality assessment traditionally used at Mustang Corral, a three-day, two-night off-campus retreat for new students. New students were sent codes and asked to take the assessment before they arrived on campus. Each person's strengths were placed on their nametag at check-in and served as a reference while attending the retreat. Before the buses left for the retreat site, the students learned about all 34 strengths and were given real-life examples of how each strength might play out in someone's life.

At Mustang Corral, we incorporated strengths into reflection questions at the end of each Round-Up, a small group session focused on a specific first-year issue. These questions were for reflection, but also used in discussion within these groups as well. New students also did an activity where they were broken up into four themes — thinking, impacting, relating, and striving — and given different colored bandanas for each theme. Each student was charged with finding four other people for each large theme and finding out how they saw their strengths play out in their daily lives. Bandanas were distributed by each person's top strength!

## **5. CREATING A STRENGTHS-BASED CULTURE ON CAMPUS**

### **In Their Own Words:**

#### **Michael Shonrock of Texas Tech University**

We have gone through the pilot training with professionals. This coaching was something that was unique just for us. It was a good long-term investment about helping people identify. I always felt that unless you actually understand your strengths and the strengths of your department, then it's going to be hard for you to articulate that to other faculty, staff, or students. And so that's why it's important that you start at the top and be sure that people understand and appreciate it. Also, get the "buy in" because this is something that has a tremendous opportunity and potential at colleges and universities.

I'm a member of the president's cabinet, and I've given the codes to all of the president's cabinet, so they are very much aware of it. In fact, since we do our annual report, we talk about being a strengths-based organization, and we've revised our mission and some of our goals. But most importantly, I've gotten our student

leaders engaged with it — all of our student government, our student senators — and so they interact with the leadership of the campus, the chancellor, the president, provost, and others. They ask, what's your strengths? So it's just creating a new language on the campus, and it takes time.

Like anything else, it takes a grass roots development. We started just within our division and started building on that. It took some time, and then it took about a year or so to get our resident's life staff to recognize some of the value. Now they've totally bought into it, so the resident assistants and the directors talk about the strengths. StrengthsQuest has been initially rolled out within the student affairs area, but now we're starting to get it engaged more with the freshmen seminar, which is in the academic area. We are also getting some of our advisors, academic advisors, and the assistant and associate deans.

#### **Carl Haynes of Tompkins Cortland Community College**

The concept of strengths has been incorporated into our current vision statement at Tompkins Cortland Community College (TC3): "To see strengths and unique potential in every person. To inspire people to make the courageous choice to learn, grow, and serve." Strengths are also directly referred to in the descriptions of our values of excellence and diversity. Over the past several years, faculty and staff have been involved in many aspects of recognizing people's human potential for learning and growth. For example, people have studied and been involved in the educational application of brain research, multiple intelligences, cognitive science research, etc. Incorporating StrengthsQuest into the context of this other work seems consistent. StrengthsQuest has been incorporated not only in the classroom activities with selected faculty around the campus, but has also been incorporated in our co-curricular activities, our resident advisor training, our tutor training, and staff and leadership development on campus. StrengthsQuest is being infused into the culture of our campus from many different directions simultaneously.

I learned about StrengthsQuest at a League for Innovation Conference. This coincided with members of our faculty and staff who were at a different conference learning about Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as an approach to planning and organizational development. When we began to discuss our respective ideas on campus and discovered a "strengths" focus in each of these concepts, it seemed to resonate well with the direction in which we wanted to move. It was more than a year-long effort in working with the college community, both with respect to the AI process and the strengths-based concept. We eventually developed a revised mission and vision statement that incorporates strength as a part of our vision and values.

We in higher education, particularly in community colleges, tend to approach education from a deficit-driven approach. Through various assessment and testing methods, we help students learn what their deficiencies are and then prescribe some type of corrective action. The great thing about StrengthsQuest is that we are able to engage in a strengths conversation at that same time — balancing a student's understanding of their strengths and

challenges and starting them on a pathway of learning how to leverage what they are good at and what their strengths represent in addressing their academic preparation, as well as career development, relationship development, etc.

One of our faculty members has videotaped a number of testimonials from several of her students about what StrengthsQuest meant to them. What was particularly disheartening was that so many of them said “I never knew I had any strengths.” Many of our faculty and staff over and over again say that this kind of feedback really tugs at their heartstrings when they hear it because they know that it is genuine and the students get truly excited about what they are good at and then begin to make good academic choices, good career choices, and better choices in terms of their relationships with others, whether it is a roommate, family, colleagues, and/or faculty. It is truly transformational in the lives of the people who engage with it in a serious manner.

Every campus will need to consider their own culture and how best to develop a “strengths” focus on their campus and how best to incorporate StrengthsQuest in their initiatives. Our first step after learning about StrengthsQuest was to invite Gallup to hold a training program on our campus where we invited faculty, counseling, administrative, and support staff to participate. While we initially planned some strategic student pilots, it was simply the “buzz” about StrengthsQuest and what it was that really began to build momentum and ultimately led to incorporating it into our culture around campus. Various departments wanted to use it within their departments as a way of building better relationships and to help people work more effectively together. I used it with my senior leadership team. Several faculty used it with certain classes. Our counselors and faculty began to use it in advising situations. Later, our residence life staff began to use it. We did not direct the initiatives, but rather coordinated them as people began to recognize the value of what it could mean in students’ lives and began to seek help from people we had trained on campus to work with StrengthsQuest.

They took advantage of the training to learn how to serve their respective students or departments accordingly. We were, however, very strategic about one thing — we utilized some available grant funding to support all the initiatives for the first couple years. By taking any question of cost “off the table,” staff and faculty remained focused on the value of the program itself, without the distraction of concerns for cost to students.

As president, I certainly did not issue any edict or directive regarding the use of StrengthsQuest. It was truly the power of the tool itself and the concept that was its own driving force. My role was simply to support the people who wanted to take the initiative with StrengthsQuest and to encourage the sharing of what they were learning with others on campus. That support from my office and the Deans on campus was very important.

**Doug Hallenbeck, Missy Bryant, Emily Sandvall, and Leasa Kowalski of SMU**

Start with faculty and staff members. If you get them on board with the assessment and educate them, then it is more likely that

there will be buy-in from the students. When you are working with students and the assessment, start small. Pick a particular group or program to “test” the assessment. Assess that group or program for its effectiveness and move from there.

### **Jon Wergin of Antioch University**

StrengthsQuest has potential at two levels in higher education. At the individual level, StrengthsQuest helps individual professionals identify their strengths and ways of using these strengths in the service of the common good — an important quality of “leadership in place.” At the group level, StrengthsQuest can be an important part of a larger process of Appreciative Inquiry; by identifying individual strengths and building on them, an organization can develop its fullest potential.

### **Practices Worth Noting:**

#### **Tompkins Cortland Community College**

Our mission: We serve our community by meeting educational needs, creating an environment for student success, and preparing our students and ourselves for citizenship in a global society.

Our vision: To see strengths and unique potential in every person. To inspire people to make the courageous choice to learn, grow, and serve.

#### **Greenville College (IL)**

Since its implementation in August 2000, a strengths-based approach to student success has had a noticeable impact on the Greenville College campus. Individually and collectively, many students, faculty, and staff have integrated strength-based thinking and language into their daily lives. (For more information about this approach, see: <http://www.greenville.edu/academics/gallupstrengths/index.shtml>.)

### **Students**

- Students use StrengthsQuest as part of the first-year seminar (COR 101) required of all freshmen and transfer sophomores.
- Each COR 101 instructor is asked to devote at least three class sessions to the StrengthsFinder results. Often, classwork and assignments enhance the students’ understanding and application of their strengths.
- The COR 301 course for transfer students has been redesigned with a strengths-based perspective.
- The interdisciplinary senior capstone course (COR 401) involves students working in small groups that must reflect a variety of academic majors and a constructive mix of students’ strengths.
- Resident Chaplains are encouraged to facilitate discussions in the residence halls with individuals and small groups of students.
- Some of the coaches discuss with athletes how to transfer the application of strengths from the athletic



arena to student success in the classroom. Last year, the Women's Basketball Coach gave each student a photo and plaque on which he identified two strengths that had contributed to the team's success that season.

- "Care Team" meetings with at-risk students always involve, and usually begin with, a conversation about the student's strengths.
- Faculty advisors are encouraged to include strengths in conversations about academic and career planning.
- Each spring, a special strengths dinner is hosted in the Dining Commons with students sitting at a table identified for conversation about one of the 34 strengths. Faculty and staff guide conversations with students about how that strength has been evident in their lives and how further development of that strength can lead to greater effectiveness and personal fulfillment.
- The "Learning Contract" completed by each student on academic probation includes a listing of the student's strengths.
- The "Counselor Intake Form" used in the Counseling Center includes a listing of the student's top five strengths.
- Students on probation sometimes are asked to meet with the Strengths Program Coordinator to explore ways the student can build upon their strengths to improve study habits, comprehension, etc.
- The student newspaper ran a very amusing weekly StrengthsFinder Horoscope for several months, as well as several articles about the strengths project.
- Student information on the campus Intranet site includes the students' strengths, unless they request that information not to be made public.
- All students in Greenville's degree completion program (currently 200+) use *Now, Discover Your Strengths* as a textbook in the first module, with about two hours devoted to helping the cohort understand and apply their strengths as these older students return to college.

## Faculty and Staff

- All faculty members and many of their spouses have completed the StrengthsFinder. Faculty members have been provided with training on how to incorporate strengths in advising students and in applying their strengths to improve teaching and student learning.
- Approximately 20 faculty and staff were trained as strengths' coaches by The Gallup Organization.
- Greenville's Intranet site includes a "sort" mechanism allowing employees to see the strengths of other employees (with their permission) and to do a sort by each of the 34 strengths to see which employees have that strength.
- All faculty and staff have been given a personalized "strengths plaque" that can be posted outside the office door or on a desk or shelf in the office.

- Several in-service "strength-based" training opportunities have been provided for all staff, designed to enhance employees' understanding of their own strengths as well as the working together as teams. Departmental training and discussion around strengths has also been provided (e.g., Physical Plant staff, Records Office staff, Admissions Office staff, etc.).
- New Employee Orientation has included a block of time at which the strengths-based approach is discussed, with conversation about the strengths of the new employees.

## Board

- The board and spouses spent a half-day workshop session to better understand what it means to be a strengths-based campus and how the board could work more effectively with their combination of strengths.
- In November 2003, each board committee spent time with a campus strengths coach to discuss their individual strengths and how the committees could work more effectively around their strengths.

## Hiring and Evaluation

- Every new full-time employee hired by Greenville College completes the StrengthsFinder instrument, with the employee's strengths listed on the Personnel Action Form.
- Goals of the President's cabinet members are articulated in relation to strengths.
- The annual performance reviews have, in some years, incorporated discussions around strengths.

## SUMMARY

Developing a campus environment that focuses on who students are and what they can do with their lives is important. StrengthsQuest can be an integral part of an intentional strategy for developing students. Thus, leaders have an opportunity to employ the philosophy and techniques, including StrengthsFinder and its accompanying programs, to achieve this goal. Leaders can adopt a perspective that both looks at an organization and a strategy of looking into the future. Through StrengthsQuest they can focus on what is positive about the organization and envision and create future possibilities of the organization. The perspective and activities are grounded on what is judged to be right, good, productive, and feasible when an organization stresses the positive, its present, and its future.

Leaders in an organization can best achieve this goal by functioning at two levels — the organizational and the individual. At the organizational level, leaders are engaged in imagining what is possible for the organization. However, creating these organization goals of the future and developing strategies to achieve them is most effective when leaders are maximizing the achievements of all of the members working in concert, each complementing each other with his or her unique gifts and strengths. It is important to respect and honor the uniqueness of each person,



while also taking into account the collective contributions of each member. It is the collective contributions of the members that make an effective and successful organization.

For individuals to achieve at their maximal level, they need to know who they are and how they can best contribute to the organization of which they are members or, in general terms, to the common good. Leaders play an important and critical role in creating the right environment for members to discover, develop, and apply their strengths. Leaders themselves must invest in the people around them. Leaders view and treat each person as a “leader in place,” one who has a sense of who they are, a commitment to contribute to the common good by applying their strengths, respect for others and their unique gifts and talents, and willingness to help others find their own self — their voice.

Leaders, thus, have a personal vision based on who they are (the individual level) and a collective vision (the organizational level), and foster the growth of the organization through the growth of each member. A leader — and every person is a “leader in place” — is one who always begins with oneself. A leader learns who they are as a unique person with gifts and strengths (e.g., facilitated by the Clifton StrengthsFinder instrument). Then, with the challenge and support of colleagues, family, and friends, they develop and apply their strengths, whether it be in life, at school, or at work. This process of finding one’s voice and living it out in the world around oneself is known as vocation, i.e., listening, learning, and living from within one’s true self and sense of calling and then living from it. If every person in her unique way is a “leader in place,” as we have argued, then leadership at any level in an organization can be viewed in terms of “leading inside-out.”

Leaders at the head of an organization share more responsibility than others in the organization in setting the collective vision of the organization and communicating it to its members and to other external audiences. But the process of engaging all members in being “leaders in place,” applies to everyone in the organization. Leaders first need to know themselves so they can lead themselves based on their own sense of who they are — find their voice — and then help others find their own voice so they, in turn, lead from an inner commitment. In short, the process begins with oneself but never stays there; instead, it is an inside-out synergetic relationship between who one is and what one does in relationship with others. In short, one invests one’s strengths in others for the organizational good — the collective or common good.

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