

Integrating Strength-Based Education into a First-Year Experience Curriculum¹

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Abstract

This article describes an initiative that integrated a strengths-based curriculum into a first-year experience program at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. Using a positive psychology framework, students completed the StrengthsQuest and participated in activities designed to help them learn and apply their signature talent themes. A pre- and postsurvey were included to assess measures related to students' self-awareness. The results suggest that a curriculum based on strengths positively impacts students' awareness of their strengths, a factor that, in turn, has positive implications for students' major/career choices and future decision-making. Strategies for practice and guidelines for future research are highlighted.

The strengths-based movement continues to make progress in various higher education contexts (Schreiner, 2010; Shushok & Hulme, 2006). One such strengths-based tool is the StrengthsQuest (SQ) higher education program published by the Gallup Organization. SQ is grounded in the principles of positive psychology and college student development concepts including life-career decision-making, values clarification, and character development (Lopez & Louis, 2009; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). The philosophy of strengths-based education—and the application of SQ—are clearly documented in the scholarly literature on college student character and development, including two articles in the *Journal of College and Character* (Bowers & Lopez, 2010; Lopez & Louis, 2009). The purpose of this best practices article is to describe and analyze the impact of a strengths-based curriculum that was infused into a first-year experience course in the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. More specifically, the overarching central research question framing this inquiry and evaluation was, “What is the impact of a strengths-enriched curriculum on the self-awareness of first-year students?” We will provide an overview of positive psychology principles, discuss the SQ tool, and

¹ The StrengthsQuest intervention and philosophy in this model were briefly described in an article in the National Career Development Association (NCDA) Career Convergence, May 2010, *Infusing Career Assessment into a First-Year Experience Course* by Michael J. Stebleton.

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describe the intervention and the outcomes of the program. Finally, we will outline implications and recommendations for practice for student affairs practitioners plus offer suggestions for future scholarly inquiry.

The success of first-year experience courses is well documented in student engagement and student development literature (Fidler & Hunter, 1989; Keup & Barefoot, 2005; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Effective first-year programs can positively impact student engagement as well as retention and grade point average (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, & Associates, 2005; Starke, Harth, & Sirianni, 2001; Strayhorn, 2009). Depending on the structure and content of a first-year experience course, issues related to self-awareness and major/career exploration are often included. Frequently, these discussions explore weighty questions such as: “Who am I?” “What is important to me?” “Where am I going?” Curricula can be intentionally designed to examine questions tied to values clarification and potential character development issues. This article describes how student affairs professionals at a large, research university infused a strengths-based module into a first-year inquiry course and the resulting impact on students’ self-awareness of strengths. The primary leaders on this project included academic and career advisers, faculty members in the Department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning, and several key college administrators. Two of the objectives of this intervention were to enhance self-awareness of first-year students and to provide an overview of strengths-based philosophy and education.

Literature Review

Positive psychology is a relatively new area of psychology that has gained recognition and popularity (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Snyder & Lopez, 2002). From a historical perspective, the origins of psychology as a discipline are solidly based on identifying dysfunction, or what is *wrong* with the client or the student (Shushok & Hulme, 2006). In positive psychology, the focus of inquiry is on what is *right* with the individual. Areas of scholarly contributions focus on topics such as hope, optimism, happiness, and well-being.

The field of positive psychology can be applied to a variety of settings, including higher education contexts. Schreiner (2010) discussed her concept of *thriving* from a student affairs perspective, encouraging student development professionals and educators to help college students move from simply surviving to thriving in their new environments. Advocates of strength-based approaches have contended that strength-based programs and philosophies can improve college student engagement and retention—the idea being that if students can identify and apply their strengths they will be more focused on their academic and career goals (Anderson, 2006). The objectives of a strengths-based curriculum are to help students to see their potential and to empower them to be successful personally and professionally from a strengths-based perspective. In recent years, numerous college and universities—both faith-based and secular institutions—have initiated interventions to engage students and to assist them with identifying their key strengths. One such intervention is the SQ program published by the Gallup organization and based on the StrengthsFinder assessment tool (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001).

First-Year Inquiry Program and Strengths-Based Intervention

Each fall semester, the CEHD at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities accepts approximately 450–475 new students. Students enroll in a required 4-credit course, First Year Inquiry: Multi-disciplinary Ways of Knowing. The course is currently team taught by two or three faculty members

from diverse disciplines (Stebbleton, Jensen, & Peter, 2010). The course is a required class that serves as a core component of the college's first-year experience; each section of the class has a theme (e.g., Critical Moments in History; Food for Thought . . . and Action). The course comprises 50–75 students who meet once per week in a combined large group setting for 2 hours; each faculty member also leads a break-out discussion group of approximately 25 students who meet another day for 2 hours. One of the course objectives includes helping students to think critically across disciplines using a variety of high-impact educational practices (e.g., common book experience, writing intensive requirement, and a public capstone experience (Kuh, 2008)). In the fall 2009 semester, college leaders decided to develop and infuse a strengths-focused curriculum into the existing course. The goal was to create a collaborative effort between student affairs professionals (career counselors and academic advisers) and faculty members.

Student affairs staff and faculty members opted to use the SQ, the college-adapted version of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment tool published by Gallup. The tool was selected based on four primary reasons:

1. It is grounded in extensive research, including applied work in positive psychology (Bowers, 2009; Carr, 2004; Gable & Haidt, 2005; Tan, 2006);
2. It is applicable to individuals from diverse cultures and multicultural backgrounds, including use in international settings;
3. It has outstanding practical value and can be applied to numerous student affairs contexts (e.g., residence life; academic advising; career counseling; multicultural affairs; student judicial affairs; and new student orientation); and
4. It provides students with strength-based language that they can use to discuss strengths.

The SQ philosophy assumes a proactive, positive, and holistic approach to student success and development. According to the *Clifton StrengthsFinder Resource Guide* (Gallup University, 2001), the tool measures the presence of 34 general talents or themes. These talents are based on individual preferences and can be defined as naturally recurring patterns of thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that can be productively executed. Upon completing the instrument, all students are given their top five signature themes based on their responses. Like many self-exploration tools, one of the objectives is to facilitate self-awareness for new students.

The student affairs pilot curriculum was created by leaders within the college, including career counselors, academic advisers, and several instructors in the Department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning. Several learning objectives were outlined:

1. To maintain continued synergy between faculty and student affairs so as to provide a continuity of care model of support for students.
2. To create opportunities for first-year students to build community with peers, faculty, and student affairs staff.
3. To help students develop *self-awareness* (by knowing their personal strengths and talents and acknowledging areas of development).
4. To create meaningful, relevant, and engaging experience for approximately 450–475 ethnically, socioeconomically, and geographically diverse incoming students.
5. To introduce students to key campus resources, including career and academic support services.

All entering first-year students in CEHD enrolled in the course and participated in the curriculum. A SQ activity guide and syllabus were created for students. The curriculum included a welcome week student introduction to SQ, six in-class activities described briefly below, and outlined required meetings with academic advisers. Student affairs professionals (e.g., academic advisers and career counselors in CEHD) were trained to lead discussions and related activities.

Students were introduced to the SQ and assigned to complete the tool's online assessment during a half-day welcome event for all first-year students prior to the first day of classes. The total amount of time devoted to the curriculum was approximately 6 hours. The SQ activity guide included the following components:

- *Verifying your signature themes*: Students were asked to reflect on their signature themes and to have two people they know well provide feedback if the themes applied. The purpose of this activity was to help students increase awareness of talents and to start identifying the talents of others.
- *Treasure hunt activity*: Students took part in a 30-minute group activity in which they located and interviewed 10 classmates who had at least one same talent and briefly discussed one benefit of the talent.
- *Review talent themes*: This session was dedicated to reviewing all 34 talent themes. The student affairs facilitator encouraged students to briefly reflect on their talent themes and then reviewed the definition of each talent theme. The goals were to further expose students to descriptions of the talent themes and to help understand why and how each talent theme is potentially beneficial.
- *Academic tasks worksheet*: This activity was completed first individually, then in a large group. Students were asked to do the following: complete an academic worksheet that lists academic tasks (e.g., public speaking, studying, collaborating on a group project, taking notes); indicate if the task is personally easy or challenging for them; and then identify talents they could use in this task.
- *Exploring majors and careers*: This activity required students to list all majors they were considering and utilize a minimum of two resources (e.g., *Occupational Outlook Handbook*) to further explore intended majors. The goal was to push students to think about how talent themes can be applied to a major or career opportunity.
- *SQ student action items*: This final activity required students to login to the SQ website, access their SQ portal, and utilize the SQ resources. Students were required to meet with their academic adviser within the first 6 weeks of the semester for a check-in appointment plus have a second meeting toward the end of the semester.

Methods

Participants

For purposes of this study, we conducted a study using one of the six sections of the first-year inquiry course. Sixty participants completed the pre- and postsurveys. Participants were primarily female (68%) and Caucasian (72%), and there were approximately 28% students of color; this is higher than the institutional figure of 18% students of color for the entire university. All of the participants were new first-year students. The survey was conducted in the large group meeting of the course.

Procedures

All students completed the StrengthsFinder assessment at the beginning of the fall semester. The assessment tool comprises 180 items; each one contains a pair of potential self-descriptors. After completing the tool, participants received their top five signature themes (i.e., talent themes) as a beginning point for self-assessment and discovery. StrengthsFinder is a well-established instrument;

over one million students, staff, and faculty have completed the survey according to Gallup. The assessment measures were based on over 30 years of research completed by Selection Research Incorporated and Gallup (Harter, Hayes, & Schmidt, 2004; Schmidt & Rader, 1999), including reliability and validity measures.

Pre- and postquestionnaires were administered. Questions aimed to assess confidence about perceived strengths. Examples of strength-based items were adopted from a potentiality scale used by Gallup in self-assessment items for the SQ (S. Lopez, personal communication, July 14, 2009). The survey consisted of 30 items and was arranged on a Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (*no confidence at all* in that behavior) to 5 (*complete confidence* in the behavior). We decided to focus on the items that were most closely related to self-awareness measures because this was one of the primary objectives for the initiative.

Results

Separate repeated measures of analyses were conducted to investigate the research questions as they related to students' self-efficacy on strengths awareness items. The results suggest that the SQ intervention increased students' confidence in identifying their personal strengths, accurately assessing their abilities, deciding what they value most in a major or career choice, applying their strengths to help them learn more effectively, and understanding how their strengths can help them to be realistic about expectations for the future. The overall effect sizes, as measured by Cohen's *d*, indicate the gains in student's strengths awareness self-efficacy between the presurvey and postsurvey were moderate to large (Table 1).

Discussion

The results suggest that a curriculum based on strengths positively impacts students' awareness of their strengths, a factor that, in turn, has positive implications for students' majors, career choices, and future expectations. Students who have greater self-awareness of their strengths may be better positioned to make decisions related to their academic field of study or future career, especially in regards to their career-oriented values. Knowing their strengths, students also benefit

Table 1. Strengths Awareness Efficacy Repeated Measures ANOVA Results

| Items | Pretest (n = 58) | | Posttest (n = 58) | | F | p | d |
|--|------------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------|-------|------|-------|
| | M (SD) | 95% CI | M (SD) | 95% CI | | | |
| Identify your personal strengths | 3.76 (0.71) | [3.57, 3.95] | 4.16 (0.62) | [3.99, 4.32] | 13.73 | .001 | -0.60 |
| Accurately assess your abilities | 3.53 (0.82) | [3.32, 3.75] | 4.00 (0.73) | [3.81, 4.19] | 15.43 | .001 | -0.61 |
| Decide what you value most in a major or career choice | 3.74 (0.98) | [3.48, 4.00] | 4.05 (0.83) | [3.84, 4.27] | 4.52 | .038 | -0.34 |
| Apply your strengths to help you learn more effective | 3.57 (0.75) | [3.37, 3.77] | 3.90 (0.74) | [3.70, 4.09] | 7.59 | .008 | -0.62 |
| Understand how your strengths help you to be realistic about expectations for the future | 3.62 (0.81) | [3.41, 3.83] | 3.98 (0.76) | [3.78, 4.18] | 6.84 | .011 | -0.46 |

Note. Items are based on the question, "How much confidence do you have that you could . . ."

by becoming more realistic about their future expectations and are more likely to accurately assess their own abilities within academic and career contexts. Overall, the outcomes for the initiative met the outlined objectives, with a focus on self-awareness of strengths for first-year students.

For student affairs practitioners, there are several strategies to consider when deciding to implement a comparable program based on our experiences. First, buy-in from key stakeholders is critical to success. This support includes financial and time commitment from administrators within the college/department. Initiatives will likely be more successful if decision makers can commit to a program for at least several years.

Second, we encourage mutual collaboration between student affairs practitioners and faculty members when developing a strengths-based program. Initially, we contended that the program would be most successful if faculty and student affairs partnered to create and implement the SQ training. This collaboration was more challenging than we anticipated. Because many faculty members were unfamiliar with student development and career development theories, the student affairs practitioners developed and delivered the majority of the content. In the future, SQ programming at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities will continue to be largely created and implemented by student affairs practitioners in the college; faculty will be encouraged to participate. Faculty involvement may be easier to obtain at smaller academic institutions where there is a history of strong collaboration between student affairs professionals and instructors.

Third, strengths-based curriculum can be intentionally integrated into first-year experience courses such as college success classes (e.g., University 101). Student affairs practitioners can assume lead roles in these initiatives by collaborating with administrators and instructors across campus (Stebbleton & Schmidt, 2010). Any such strengths-based initiative should involve careful planning and align with other course learning objectives. For example, student affairs practitioners who decide to infuse a strengths-based module in a stand-alone class are encouraged to collaborate closely with other stakeholders and assess content and process, and also the actual amount of time needed to make an impact.

Fourth, student affairs practitioners will want to learn about the selected instrument to be used in the targeted initiative, including benefits and potential areas of limitation for students. The Gallup Organization provides ongoing training and support for the SQ tool; it should be noted that the SQ is not the only viable product for engaging students in the process of self-awareness and major/career decision-making.

Finally, student affairs practitioners can become actively involved in evaluation and assessment of the strengths-based effort in order to determine impact; this process may include collaboration with partners at the department of institutional research on their respective campuses in order to ascertain the sustainability of such a program. At the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities, student affairs administrators recently decided to expand the SQ effort to all enrolling first-year students across all colleges. This past fall 2011 semester, most first-year students (approximately 5,100 students) completed the SQ. We are committed to this initiative for the next 2 years minimally, pending evaluation of the program.

There are several limitations of the present study. First, this is a study using one section of the first-year inquiry course at a single, large research university. Caution should be exercised when generalizing the results to other institutions and programs (e.g., private, small liberal arts colleges). Second, the sample size was largely homogenous, mainly female and White students. Research should be conducted on the effectiveness of strengths-based curriculum on more heterogeneous, diverse student populations. Third, we did not have a control group for comparison purposes; all CEHD first-year students participated in the curriculum because the strengths-based curriculum was a required component of the course. A future study may opt to create an inquiry using an experimental model by which students are randomly assigned to a treatment and control group. Finally, additional studies may involve a qualitative component that would involve individual or focus group interviews

with students who participated in a strengths-based curriculum. Interviews could provide additional insights on the major and career decision-making processes of undergraduate students.

Conclusion

The outcomes of this study provide support for a first-year undergraduate curriculum that addresses self-exploration regarding students' strengths. Results demonstrated a positive influence for college students on a range of measures, including self-awareness. Student affairs practitioners are encouraged to infuse a strengths-based development module into existing courses at their respective institutions (e.g., success classes such as University 101). Applying a strengths-based curriculum provides one example of how students can learn to identify and apply their signature strengths—in this case using SQ as a tool and positive psychology as a theoretical framework for the course.

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