

Do students who take the StrengthsQuest assessment connect their strengths to statements indicating self-efficacy?

A Thesis
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA
BY

Lara Christley

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

Mike Stebleton, Cathy Wambach

August 2013

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Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my advisors for their guidance and support as I worked my way through this thesis project and paper. I would also like to thank Jeanne Higbee, Director of Graduate Studies, for her personal care and attention as she helped me overcome some obstacles I faced during the program. Jennifer Franko, Assistant to the DGS, was very helpful in answering the day-to-day questions I had as a student. And last, but certainly not least, the community of faculty and students in the department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning who made this master's program a meaningful experience that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to all students who have struggled to find their place in the halls of higher education.

Abstract

Some students, in spite of the challenges they face, do succeed in college. This may be due to many factors, including a high level of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is important because it has been related to persistence and achievement in education (Chemers, 2001). One way we might increase a student's self-efficacy is to provide a language that describes their strengths. This master's research project sought to examine the relationship between a student's strengths and statements indicating self-efficacy. My sample population was underrepresented first-year and sophomore TRIO students in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities. Through semi-structured interviews, students shared experiences in their personal, academic and career spheres as seen through the lens of their top 5 Strengths. Evidence of self-efficacy was found in the students' responses.

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Introduction

Further Inquiry into Underrepresented Students

While some students relish the new challenges and experiences that college provides, others struggle in this new environment, surrounded by new people. The expectations of college are higher than those they encountered in high school and students are expected to function in a much more independent manner. In addition to these transition issues faced by some students, underrepresented students face additional hurdles (Dannells, 1993; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Ovink & Veazey, 2011). They often do not have the same level of academic preparation as their Caucasian and/or more affluent peers. Their ways of knowing and operating in the world do not compliment the new expectations of a post-secondary environment. Bourdieu (2008), who looked extensively at differences in achievement based on social class, would say they lacked cultural capital.

In short, underrepresented students are less likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution and they are less likely to graduate. The great disparity in educational outcomes follows the students who do not graduate to a lifetime of unequal employment outcomes (Chaney, Muraskin, Cahalan, & Goodwin, 1998). There is research on various aspects of underrepresented student populations that look at various pre-college and college characteristics and how they may or may not affect graduation rates. The general consensus is that the graduation and retention rates of first-generation students are lower than those of second-generations students (Pascarella, Pierson, Wolniak, & Terenzini,

2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini, Springer, Yaeger, Pascarella, & Nora, 1996). There is also research on the benefits of a strength-based approach in many contexts, including post-secondary education (Buckingham, 2010; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Lopez et al., 2006; Schreiner, 2010; Smith, 2006; Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2011). What is lacking in the literature is connecting a strength-based approach to increasing the graduation rates of underrepresented students.

While there is a difference in the graduation rates of underrepresented students and their more affluent and/or Caucasian peers, many underrepresented students do succeed in college and persist to graduation. One factor that might influence these successful students is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief that you can accomplish a goal paired with the action required to achieve that goal (Bandura, 1993). If having high self-efficacy increases the probability of academic success and graduation, then finding ways to increase a student's self-efficacy might lead to increased success on campus and greater graduation rates.

One way we might increase a student's self-efficacy is to give them a language that describes their strengths. The StrengthsQuest assessment is designed for this purpose. And all incoming first-year students at the University of Minnesota are currently taking this assessment. My research question seeks to fill the gap in the literature by connecting a strengths-based approach to the self-efficacy of underrepresented students. Through interviews I examine the relationship between the language of strengths and the experiences of underrepresented students in academic,

personal and career spheres. My central research question is how does taking the StrengthsQuest assessment influence the self-efficacy of underrepresented students in the TRIO program in the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) at the University of Minnesota (U of M)?

Underrepresented Students

Underrepresented students are those who not adequately represented in comparison to the majority of students on campuses in higher education. Students who are underrepresented are from the following groups of students: first-generation; low-income; they have a disability; they come from an underrepresented minority group; and/or they are immigrants or refugees. This is in comparison to Caucasian, second-generation, middle or upper class students who are completely able-bodied. For my research study sample population, I asked that students be first-generation, low-income, and/or from an underrepresented minority group. Each group is detailed in the literature review to paint a broad picture of these three groups of students and how they are faring in higher education.

First-generation students.

The term “first-generation” has been defined in many ways. In this thesis project, I, like Pike and Kuh, consider a student to be first-generation if neither parent has a bachelor’s degree (2005, p. 277). Therefore a student whose parent(s) started college, but didn’t finish their degree would be considered first-generation. A student whose parent has an associate’s degree would also be considered a first-generation student. Having a

first-generation status as a student is important because first-generation students differ from their traditional peers in both personal and academic characteristics as they enter college and in how they experience college. With few exceptions first-generation students are at a disadvantage (Pascarella et al., 2004; Terenzini et al., 1996). As campus diversity increases, so too does the number of first-generation students on campus (Pascarella et al., 2004). It is becoming increasingly clear how important a college degree is for global competition and upward social and financial mobility. Unfortunately, a disproportionate number of first-generation students do not succeed in college. There is a 15% gap in persistence rates between first and second-generation students (Pike & Kuh, 2005).

Differences between first- and second-generation students.

According to research conducted by Terenzini et al. (1996) first-generation and “traditional” or second-generation students differ in both personal and academic characteristics. These characteristics tend to fall into three broad categories: pre-college, transition to college and college. In high school first-generation students have significantly lower math and reading skills compared to second-generation students. They have lower initial critical thinking skills. First-generation students tend to come from low-income homes. They spend less time socializing in high school with both peers and teachers and are more likely to be women and Hispanic. They have lower degree aspirations. They report receiving less encouragement from home to pursue a college

degree. First-generation students tend to be older and have more dependent children. They likely need more time to complete their degrees (Terenzini et al., 1996).

As they transition from high school to college first-generation students have a more difficult time. They experience all the stresses that their peers do, but in addition they face substantial cultural, social and academic transitions (Dennis, Phinney, & Chuateco, 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005). First-generation students stand to gain much by attending college, but that they are also losing much too. The social, cultural and economic mobility they gain by going to college can propel them away from their roots and into a period of confusion, conflict and isolation (Terenzini et al., 1996).

The disparities continue to pile up as the students settle into campus. First-generation students are more likely to complete fewer credit hours per year, to leave college at the end of their first year; they tend to have lower educational aspirations; study fewer hours; and work more than their peers. They are less likely to live on campus; enroll in an honors program; to remain enrolled and to be on track to degree completion; and are less likely to believe that faculty cared about them. First-generation students are less involved on campus, but when they are involved first-generation students get more benefits from that involvement than their peers (Pascarella et al., 2004). First-generation students have lower grades than their peers whose parents graduated from college. First-generation students compared to more traditional students report experiencing more discrimination in campus (Terenzini et al., 1996). They also

participated more in cultural awareness trainings and reported receiving more encouragement from their peers to stay in school. These differences persisted under a variety of controls for background characteristics like family income, aspirations and high school involvement (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996).

Effect of first-generation status on educational attainment.

We see that there are real, lived differences between the characteristics and experiences of first- and second-generation students. These differences are documented in high school, as the students transition to college and as they work towards degree completion in college. In most cases first-generation students are at a disadvantage compared to their peers. The gap in educational achievement between first-generation students and their peers has profound impacts on their lives. “Given that many of the variables on which first-generation and traditional students differ have been linked to academic performance and persistence, the combined portrait is one of students at academic risk” (McCarron & Inkelas, 2006, p. 543).

Low-income.

Background information.

In recent years, especially since the Great Recession, we have seen an increase in poverty in the United States. At the same time federal standards for the cost of living have not kept pace with the actual costs of living (Datnow, Solorzano, Watford, & Park, 2010). While a family’s earning power has decreased, their wages have stagnated or

fallen. Additionally, compared to a generation ago, there are fewer blue-collar jobs that someone without a college degree can find. This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many jobs that only require a high school diploma do not pay a middle class wage (Gerardi, 2006). Add to these difficult economic circumstances that it is very difficult to rise above the economic circumstances you were born into and we have a dark picture of the repercussions of growing up in a low-income household. If you were born into a lower class family it is most likely that you will remain in that social stratum. Those families with the lowest levels of education are more likely to remain in or move into the lowest quintile of job earners. This lack of social mobility for low-income families is often affected by other factors such as their race or ethnicity (Datnow et al., 2010).

In addition to race and ethnicity, these students also differ in significant ways from their peers in academic preparation, socioeconomic status, parental involvement and cultural and social capital. Low-income students are often the first in their families to attend college. Their parents do not have college degrees and experience first-hand the reality of lower paying jobs (Gerardi, 2006; McCarron & Inkelas, 2006). Despite extensive efforts to increase college degree attainment for low-income youth, only 13% of low-income youth complete a four-year degree by age 28. A large majority, 77%, of low-income youth chose work over college. The low wages they earn will likely follow them through their entire life (Datnow et al., 2010).

How do we define who is low-income?

Low-income status is often defined by socioeconomic status (SES). How SES is measured and what components make it up differ from one study to another. This can make it difficult to compare one study to another around low-income, working poor or working class students. Sirin (2005) in his meta-analysis of SES and academic achievement, found that in defining someone as being in a low SES you might look at the individual student, the school or the neighborhood. While it is agreed that SES is multidimensional and more than just the amount of money the parent(s) earn, again, there is some disagreement of what else constitutes SES. Many agree that SES incorporates parental income, parental education, and parental occupation as the three core aspects of SES. Low-income is often operationalized as being eligible for federal Pell grants.

Effect of low-income on educational attainment.

Sirin (2005) found that studies range from strong to no relation between SES and academic achievement. Many of the studies contradict one another. This could be a result of the many different ways that low-income is defined. In addition, a host of contextual factors like minority status, neighborhood location and the school attended can play into how SES affects academic achievement. Of the factors examined, Sirin found that family SES at the student and school level were the most strongly correlated to academic performance. Astin (1993) found that coming from a high SES increases the chances a student has of graduating within four years. SES plays not only into the monetary resources a family has, but it also reflects the broader social capital the family

and school have, the quality of school they send their children to and the resources those schools have for education (Sirin, 2005). In the end, students from lower SES may have a harder time integrating into the university (and therefore staying and succeeding) (Richardson, Abraham, & Bond, 2012).

Looking at and understanding how a low SES affects students is important because research shows that higher SES leads to higher educational expectations and low SES leads to lower educational expectations. In fact, SES may be the most powerful predictor of educational expectations (Museus, Harper, & Nichols, 2010). Trusty (1998) found that students from poor families were much more likely to expect to graduate from high school only. Students from rich families were much more likely to expect to earn a master's degree. This is important because having high educational expectations is the first step towards applying to colleges, being accepted and ultimately succeeding to degree attainment.

Underrepresented minority students.

Demographics.

The United States of America is becoming an increasingly diverse nation. It is estimated that by the year 2025, 46% of 15-19 year olds will be from minority groups. Substantial differences exist in achievement rates between Caucasians and African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Given the many benefits of a college education, it is going to become increasingly important to support college degree attainment, particularly among racial minority groups (Museus et al.,

2010). College persistence is important because attaining a college degree has major implications for a lifetime of economic and occupational attainment. Unequal persistence rates between minority and Caucasian students further highlights the need to understand what factors are most important to encouraging persistence and degree completion (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Nora, Cabrera, Serra Hagedorn, & Pascarella, 1996).

Aspirations, expectations and the achievement gap.

Despite unequal educational outcomes, educational aspirations are high for all racial and ethnic groups. However, substantial gaps do exist between the aspirations of Caucasians and Asians and those of African Americans, Hispanics and Native Americans (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Aspirations are desired outcomes absent of real-life limitations. Expectations take those real-life limitations into account. It is especially important to take into account the real-life limitations on expectations when we talk about underrepresented populations. Perceptions of barriers present very real limitations for these students' educational expectations. The expectations of students seeking postsecondary education based on what is achievable. These educational expectations factor into actual educational attainment (Museus et al., 2010). If you do not aspire to a college degree it is unlikely you will ever attain one. If you have real obstacles in front of you that limit your expectations for attaining a degree it is unlikely you will attain one.

Differences in educational experiences.

The differences seen in the educational achievement gap start in elementary school and continue through high school. Poor children and African American, Hispanic

and Native American children are tracked into technical and non-college bound curricula and vocational programs compared to their Caucasian and/or more affluent peers. Research shows that college-track students are more likely to obtain higher grades, complete college, have a more positive self-concept, and have lower rates of truancy. Racial differences in the tracks students are placed or pushed into as well as the courses they take in high school can lead to a widening of the academic achievement gap. Diverse, low-income urban schools do not offer the same level of college-prep classes that more-affluent and Caucasian, suburban schools provide. Predominantly Caucasian and wealthy schools provided two to three times as many advanced courses as compared to low-income, predominantly minority schools (Kao & Thompson, 2003). This difference in educational opportunity means that minority students enter college with lower academic abilities than their Caucasian counterparts. Minority students had lower academic performance at the end of their freshman year (Nora & Cabrera, 1996).

Persistence and attainment.

We know that underrepresented minority students have lower levels of persistence and degree attainment in college. There are many reasons for this and surely those reasons interact in ways that are hard to document and parse out into quotable data points. [It is interesting to note that once factors like generation, language and social capital are controlled for, much of the impact that one's ethnicity has on dropping out diminishes (Kao & Thompson, 2003).] Nora and Cabrera (1996) found when looking at the total effects of a number of variables on the persistence of minority students, four factors

exerted influence: parental encouragement, social integration, academic and intellectual development, and grade point averages. Kao and Thompson (2003) found that that parental support was important too. In addition to family support, they found SES and parental education were the best predictors of degree attainment for underrepresented students. Nora et al. (1996) indicated that institutional experiences, academic achievement and environmental pull factors contributed most to persistence. For minorities, the most detrimental effects on leaving college came from family responsibilities and working off-campus. And minority students are more likely than Caucasian students to attend school part-time (Kao and Thompson, 2003). Attending school part time is another risk factor for degree attainment and is a reflection of the many pull factors that Nora et al. found.

We also know that racial and ethnic minority students are more likely to attend community colleges which have worse degree attainment outcomes than four-year colleges and universities. Unfortunately, there is some evidence that minority students have become more concentrated at the community college level. This means that from the start these students are less likely to attain their degree simply because they attend a 2-year instead of a 4-year institution (Kao & Thompson, 2003). Like other researchers, Dennis et al. (2005) found that once on campus, support from peers and family is important to academic success for minority students. Peers on campus provide social support while family members provide emotional support. In diverse populations one of the most important predictors of college outcomes is peer support. For example, students

will do better if they have friends who form study groups or if they have a peer mentor. Students that are struggling academically and are having a hard time adjusting to campus life really need someone to help support and guide.

Background of TRIO program

History of TRIO.

The federal TRIO programs, started under the administration of President Lyndon Johnson, were created to provide educational opportunities for students who were economically disadvantaged or from underrepresented minority groups (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). These are students similar in background to the students in my sample population. One reason I chose my sample from CEHD's TRIO program is because these students have already been identified as low-income or from an underrepresented minority group. In 1964, when Congress passed the Economic Opportunity Act, it authorized the creation of 18 Upward Bound programs. Educational Talent Search and Student Support Services soon followed. These three programs became known as the federal TRIO programs (Blake, 1998; McElroy & Armesto, 1998; Pitre & Pitre, 2009). In 1972 the fourth program, the Educational Opportunities Centers, was created. The fifth TRIO program, the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement program was created in 1986 (McElroy & Armesto, 1998). Today there are five TRIO programs authorized under the Higher Education Act (Blake, 1998).

The TRIO programs aim to increase educational opportunities for what I call in this paper underrepresented students. These are students who for various reasons are not

adequately represented in higher education. They might be first-generation students (they are the first in their family to earn a bachelor's degree). They might come from a low-income family. This is generally defined in higher education as being eligible for federal Pell grants. They might be a member of an underrepresented minority group. Or perhaps they are students with a disability. "The primary goal of TRIO programs is to provide equal educational opportunities for all U.S. citizens by increasing college readiness and developing higher education aspirations among students from low-income, first-generation college and ethnic/racial minority backgrounds" (Pitre & Pitre, 2009, p. 97). Although the majority of TRIO participants belong to ethnic minority groups, TRIO serves all low-income and first-generation students regardless of ethnic background. As we move into the 21st century it is becoming evident that a college education is critical to both social mobility and financial stability (Pitre & Pitre, 2009). Unfortunately, educational opportunities are not the same for all students.

Student Support Services.

The third TRIO program, Student Support Services (SSS) is one of the largest programs to help retain underrepresented students at the postsecondary level. SSS exists to increase retention and graduation rates of underrepresented students, to increase transfer rates and to foster a campus climate where underrepresented students can succeed (Chaney et al., 1998; McElroy & Armesto, 1998). The services that SSS provides are both academic and social in nature. SSS provides underrepresented students with assistance in meeting basic college requirements and with academic and personal

support (Chaney et al., 1998; McElroy & Armesto, 1998). By going beyond supporting only academics, college administrators are hoping they can help these students feel at home on campus. When we talk about whether a student feels at home and finds their place on campus we are talking about integration. Integration refers to how well a student fits into the campus culture and norms of their school. Students who are underrepresented tend to have less academic preparation when arriving on campus, but also are less likely to feel integrated on campus. It is less likely that they will attend school full-time or interact with faculty, staff or other students on campus and therefore less likely they will integrate (Chaney et al., 1998). An integrated student is more likely to complete their degree. A student who fails to find a supportive campus environment is less likely to stay and graduate.

Demographic reality.

The importance of integration on campus and whether our campuses are offering a campus climate where underrepresented students feel welcome and supported will become increasingly more relevant as major demographic shifts take place in the United States (Kao & Thompson, 2003; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pitre & Pitre, 2009). One of the most daunting challenges in higher education is how do we make sure that we provide higher levels of postsecondary access and success for underrepresented students. Students from low-income and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds are rapidly growing populations who will become the majority of college applicants. By 2050 the U.S. Census projects that 47% or close to half of our populations will be from ethnic or

minority backgrounds. If U.S. higher education is to fulfill its democratic responsibilities, “a substantial number of predominantly White colleges and universities will have to make significant improvements in their rates of enrollment, retention, and graduation of minority and low-income students” (Blake, 1998).

Results of TRIO Student Support Services.

The good news is that racial and ethnic achievement gaps have narrowed in the last thirty years (Kao & Thompson, 2003). In one generation the federal TRIO programs have, through various strategies, increased the college attendance and graduation rates of underrepresented students (Blake, 1998). The federal TRIO programs have increased both the attendance and attainment rates of underrepresented students (Pitre & Pitre). SSS have been an integral part of supporting underrepresented students. By having my sample population within the CEHD TRIO program and therefore under a SSS office, I hoped to find out if there was another tool that could be added to the toolbox of what is most effective in higher education for these students. Chaney et al. (1998) looked at what components of SSS had a positive impact on the retention and graduation rates of their students. They found that students whose SSS program was blended with other college support services and who attended SSS instructional courses, SSS peer tutoring and SSS workshops were more likely to be retained. In addition to the students who benefit from SSS because they are enrolled in a TRIO program, social science research offers strong evidence that diversity and multiculturalism benefits everyone on campus (Pitre & Pitre, 2009).

Self-Efficacy

Beyond the benefits that accrue to an individual for being in an inclusive and diverse environment, social science research also offers solid evidence of the important role self-efficacy plays in helping students succeed academically (Bandura, 1993; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001; Museus & Hendel, 2005; Zimmerman, Bandura, & Martinez-Pons, 1992). Self-efficacy is the belief that you can accomplish the goals you set coupled with agency to make those goals happen. The multiple benefits of a sense of personal efficacy do not arise simply from stating what you want or because you have the capability to make what you want happen. Saying something should not be confused with believing it to be so. Simply saying that one is capable is not necessarily self-convincing (Bandura, 1993). Self-efficacy is the belief in what you can accomplish plus agency. *Agency* is intentionally making things happen by one's actions (Bandura, 2001). The most important mechanism of agency is a person's belief about their capability to exercise control over themselves and events that affect them. Efficacy beliefs influence how people act, feel, think and motivate themselves (Bandura, 1993).

Self-efficacy in the context of education is how individuals leverage their self-efficacy toward academic goals and attainment. Academic self-efficacy is the "belief and confidence in one's ability to be effective in accomplishing their academic goals" (Museus & Hendel, 2005, p. 67). Our campuses are becoming more diverse. And we know that underrepresented students do not succeed on campus at the same rates as their more affluent and/or Caucasian peers. Our foundation for how we approach our work

with students has historically focused on the experiences of middle and upper class Caucasian men. As our campuses become more diverse it is increasingly important that we work to create an environment where all students succeed academically. We have worked to include multicultural perspectives in student development and student affairs. Yet there is still much work to be done. A major goal of formal education should be to equip students with the intellectual tools, self-beliefs, and self-regulatory capabilities to educate themselves throughout their lifetime. The higher the students' self-regulatory efficacy, the more assured they were in their efficacy to master academic subjects. Perceived efficacy promotes academic achievement both directly and by raising personal goals (Bandura, 1993).

Ability.

Self-efficacy contributes to a person's sense of ability, their motivation, their goal setting and their actual performance. Some children regard ability as a skill that can be acquired. They believe if they work hard, seek challenges and persevere they will achieve their goals. They regard mistakes as a natural part of learning and they try to learn from them. Other children view ability as fixed and inherited. No amount of hard work is going to make a difference in how well they achieve. They prefer tasks that minimize risks, because failure is indicative of their lack of intelligence. If you have individuals with the same ability, but different levels of self-efficacy, the ones with higher levels of self-efficacy will outperform those who have doubts (Bandura, 1993).

An example of how self-efficacy contributes to a person sense of ability can be found looking at college entrance exams. Low college entrance exam scores have negative psychological effects on students. Students internalize their scores. For example, Museus and Hendel (2005) found that when students performed poorly they were more likely to believe they had lower academic ability even after their grades were controlled for. The students' self-efficacy decreased not because their academic ability decreased, but because their belief in their academic ability decreased. These students will likely see a decrease in their academic performance.

Motivation.

Self-efficacy also contributes to motivation. Motivation is governed by the expectation that behavior will produce certain outcomes and the value placed on those outcomes. People act on their belief about what they can do, as well as the likely outcomes of performance. The motivating potential of outcome expectancies is thus partly governed by self-beliefs of capabilities. Someone may have an attractive goal in mind, but will not pursue it if they do not believe themselves capable of achieving it. Self-efficacy beliefs contribute to motivation in several ways: They determine the goals people set for themselves, how much effort they expend, how long they persevere in the face of difficulties and their resilience in response to failures. When faced with obstacles or doubts, those with low self-efficacy give up easily. Those with high self-efficacy double their efforts when the going gets tough (Bandura, 1993).

Deci, Vallerand, Pelletier, & Ryan (1991) found that there is a significant positive correlation between intrinsic motivation and achievement: "...Students who were intrinsically motivated for doing schoolwork and who developed more autonomous regulation styles are more likely to stay in school, to achieve, to evidence conceptual understanding, and to be well adjusted than students with less self-determined types of motivation" (p. 332). Furthermore, negative feedback has been shown to decrease intrinsic motivation by decreasing perceived competence. Decreased perceived confidence can lead to a lack of motivation and feeling helpless (Deci et al., 1991). Chemers, Hu and Garcia (2001) also found that the kind of feedback we give students matters. If students receive positive feedback they set higher goals, were more flexible in problem solving, performed better and were better able to assess their performance than students who received negative feedback.

Goal setting.

Self-efficacy contributes to academic success through goal setting abilities. Personal goal setting depends on how much you think you can achieve. The stronger the personal self-efficacy, the higher the challenges people set for themselves and the stronger their commitment is to achieving them. You are what you believe. If you envision success you are giving yourself positive guideposts. If you have low self-efficacy and doubts you envision failure. It is hard to succeed when you see failure (Bandura, 1993). Specific, difficult and achievable goals are strongly related to performance. Self-efficacy leads to higher goal-setting. High goals feed back into self-

efficacy by providing context to let one know how they are doing. Students who enter college with confidence in their ability to set goals and achieve them will do better academically. Confident students work harder, persist longer and use better learning and problem solving strategies than students with less confidence and self-efficacy (Chemers et al., 2001).

Performance.

Lastly, self-efficacy contributes to academic success through performance outcomes. People with a high sense of self-efficacy will persevere through obstacles even in environments with limited opportunity. The effort they put into the task and thus their performance is not dependent on whether the task is easy or difficult. Their effort and their performance are dependent on whether they believe they can control or modify their environment. Because students with high self-efficacy believe they can change their environment they believe they can surmount challenges. People who think their efforts to change their environment are futile will not try to even if many opportunities to do so arise (Bandura, 1993). For example, when solving math problems students with higher self-efficacy spend more time trying to solve the problems and use more efficient ways to solve the problems than students with low self-efficacy (Chemers et al., 2001).

Chemers et al. (2001) found compelling support for the role of self-efficacy in first-year student success and adjustment. Students who have a low sense of efficacy to manage academic demands are especially vulnerable to achievement anxiety. Past academic performances (either successes or failures) aroused anxiety through its effects

on perceived self-efficacy. If failures weaken student's sense of efficacy, they become anxious about scholastic demands. A student's belief in their capabilities to master academic subjects predicts their subsequent academic attainments. Their level of scholastic anxiety bears little or no relationship to their academic performance. Scholastic anxiety is best reduced by building a strong sense of efficacy. This is achieved through the development of cognitive capabilities and self-regulative skills for managing academic task demands and negative thought patterns (Bandura, 1993).

Self-efficacy in relation to academic outcomes.

Doing well academically is more than simply knowing the correct answer. It has to do with an individual's agency or their actions on behalf of themselves (Bandura, 1993). Self-efficacy has been related to persistence, tenacity and achievement in educational settings. It is related to both academic performance and persistence. Academic self-efficacy is related to student's confidence in mastering academic subjects, which in turn predicts grades (Chemers et al., 2001). A study by (Zimmerman et al., 1992) concluded that "Students beliefs in their efficacy for self-regulated learning affected their perceived self-efficacy for academic achievement, which in turn influenced the academic goals they set for themselves and their final academic achievement" (p. 663). Therefore, if we want to see increased academic achievement from students, we need to increase their self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy in relation to career outcomes.

People avoid activities and situations they believe exceed their coping capabilities. But they readily undertake challenging activities and select situations they judge themselves capable of handling. By the choices they make, people cultivate different competencies, interests, and social networks that determine life courses. Any factor that influences choice behavior can profoundly affect the direction of personal development. This is because the social influences operating in selected environments continue to promote certain competencies, values, and interests long after the self-efficacy determination of their choice has rendered its initial effect. If we look at self-efficacy in the arena of career options and outcomes, we find that the stronger people's belief in the efficacy, the more career options they consider possible, the greater the interest they show in them, the better they prepare themselves educationally for different occupations, and the greater their staying power and success in difficult occupational pursuits (Bandura, 1993).

In conclusion, a student's intellectual development cannot be isolated from the social environment in which we find them or from the social consequences of that environment. It must be analyzed from a sociocultural perspective. The adverse social and emotional effects of a low sense of cognitive efficacy are understandable. It is difficult for children to remain pro-socially oriented and retain their emotional well-being in the face of repeated scholastic failures and snubbing by peers that erode their sense of intellectual efficacy. Students who doubt their social as well as their intellectual efficacy

are likely to gravitate to peers who do not subscribe to academic values and lifestyles. Over time, growing self-doubts in cognitive competencies foreclose many occupational life courses, if not pro-social life paths. In these different ways, self-beliefs of cognitive self-efficacy can have reverberating effects on developmental trajectories in the academic arena and far beyond (Bandura, 1993).

Background of StrengthsQuest at U of M

In the fall of 2011, the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities started offering the StrengthsFinder® assessment to all incoming first-year students. Based on a series of questions, this assessment tells each student their top 5 talent themes which, if used consistently over time with good results, become strengths. [Please see Appendix A for a full list and short definitions of all 34 talent themes.] This initiative was viewed as a way to increase student’s self-knowledge, help students develop to their full potential, and in the end to increase graduation and retention rates. The university made a three-year commitment. Pending assessment measures will decide whether the school continues to offer this assessment to students (Office of Undergraduate Education & Office of Student Affairs, 2011).

The Gallup Organization offers strong research-based evidence that taking the StrengthsFinder® assessment aids self-knowledge and can indeed increase graduation and retention rates. For example, they cite increases in self-efficacy and self-perception in high school students who learned their strengths and used them. Students who learn from a strength-based approach have higher levels of engagement and do better academically.

Students whose strengths and talents were identified perceived they had greater control over their academic futures than students who did not (“Clifton Strengths School: Strengths Research,” n.d.). Also, “previous empirical studies have shown that strengths-based interventions have contributed to statistically significant increases in student retention and academic performance, as well as increases in students’ academic engagement and self-efficacy, self-confidence, optimism, direction, hope, altruism, and sense of meaning and purpose” (Schreiner, 2006, p. 3).

Strengths

What is a strength?

Broadly a strength may be defined as “that which helps a person to cope with life or that which makes life more fulfilling for oneself” (Smith, 2006, p. 25). The University of Minnesota uses the definition from the Gallup Organization found in their StrengthsFinder® literature. For the Gallup Organization, a talent is an innate ability to do something well. A strength is a combination of talent with associated knowledge and skills that are built over time. A strength is defined as the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a specific task. In short, a strength is talent plus knowledge plus skills (Buckingham, 2010). If students are able to use their strengths to complete tasks assigned to them, it is likely they will be succeeding on campus. This is particularly important for underrepresented students who may be having a harder time fitting into the campus culture socially and academically. Would it make a difference to

underrepresented students if they can identify and use their strengths? That is what I wanted to know when designing this research project.

Roots of strengths in counseling and positive psychology.

Strengths find a long time home in the field of Counseling Psychology. In 1908 Frank Parson's started the Vocations Bureau in Boston where he looked at a person's abilities in addition to limitations. In the 1930s E. G. Williamson developed a goal-orientated counseling method to help college students educational and career aspirations. Also in the 1930s Carl Rogers broke from traditional clinical psychology by focusing on individual strengths and assets. When veterans returned from World War II and entered college, campuses opened "Counseling Centers" to facilitate their vocational and personal development by focusing on strengths (Lopez et al., 2006).

While not always the case, increasingly, psychology is moving towards a strengths-based perspective in both philosophy and practice. Strengths-based psychology represents a dramatic shift in psychology from the medical model that focuses on deficits to a model that enhancing strengths. A strengths-based counseling helps psychologists learn a new language of positive qualities that are often unrecognized, unnamed and not acknowledged. Several professions and movements laid the foundation for a strength-based psychological approach to counseling: counseling psychology, prevention and positive psychology, social work, solution-focused therapy and the narrative therapy movement (Smith, 2006).

Theoretical foundation for a strengths-based approach.

Elsie J. Smith offers a strengths-based counseling theory that is a blend of the many approaches used by the theories, movements and techniques that seek to build client strengths within a multicultural framework. A dominant theme in positive psychology is that we should study strength and success as well as disease and failure. The theory is also founded on the belief that a person's greatest room for growth is in the areas of his/her strengths. It is grounded in preventative research literature: by focusing on positive qualities, psychologists can facilitate effective prevention measures. Its foundation is built on resiliency literature which states that resiliency (struggling with hardships and then overcoming) provides the process by which a strength is developed. It also draws on an update of Maslow's hierarchy of needs where the three needs (autonomy, competence and relatedness) are not necessarily ordered. Strengths-based counseling theory posits that individuals have an innate need to recognize their strengths. This is especially important because young people who are given an opportunity to develop their strengths have different life experiences than those who are not given such opportunities. Lastly, the strengths-based model is based on the concepts within multicultural counseling literature: different cultures place differing values on the same strength (Smith, 2006).

Strengths and self-efficacy.

Personal strengths allow individuals to perform well or at their personal best. While using strengths is correlated to increased well-being, there is not research that tells

us if strengths use *led* to increased well-being. Using strengths led to less stress, greater self-esteem and positive outlook. Strengths use is an important predictor of well-being. This could be by way of increased self-efficacy or positively comparing oneself to others. Those who used their strengths showed greater gains in their levels of well-being over a period of three to six months. Wood et al. (2011) calls for greater use in strengths-based interventions to help individuals increase their well-being.

Schreiner (2010) has done much work on well-being and thriving. She describes *thriving* as “the experiences of college students who are fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally” (p. 4). Students who thrive are personally and academically successful on campus. They are more likely to persist to graduation. Students who thrive know that putting effort on a regular basis into academics will help them succeed in college. They are motivated, they have goals, and they have strategies for success. Students who thrive demonstrate self-efficacy. They believe they can do whatever assignment is given to them and they manage around obstacles to get the job done. The earlier you help student’s identify their talent themes and strengths, the earlier the student receives the message that what they do matters and that they can successfully navigate college. The earlier a school intervenes in sending a positive message to students, the more opportunities those students will have to succeed, build their confidence and their self-efficacy.

This is especially true for underrepresented students on campus. Underrepresented students have often transcended personal and societal circumstances (first-generation,

low-income, or minority student). Studies on resiliency emphasize the importance of one's ability to transcend their life circumstances. Strengths help transcend personal and societal circumstances (Smith, 2006). On campus the difference in students' background (e.g., ethnicity, gender, and academic ability) is not as important to understanding their success as is their level of thriving. This is good news. It means we have the opportunity to provide interventions that will reduce the disparities in graduation rates across ethnic groups. In spite of any barriers underrepresented students may face on campus, we can help them thrive and build their self-efficacy by identifying and developing their talent themes. When we add skills and knowledge over time these talents develop into strengths that will improve students' goal setting, grades and persistence (Schreiner, 2010).

There is evidence that even relatively brief interventions to increase self-efficacy and student's ability to thrive can have lasting and significant effects. Teaching students to develop and apply their strengths can have a lasting, positive impact on college students. If we highlight a student's strengths we tap into their motivation. They are intrinsically motivated and success leads to increased confidence and self-efficacy (Schreiner, 2010).

Methods

Student Sample and Procedure

Prior to interviewing students I had successfully navigated the Institutional Review Board (IRB) process at the University of Minnesota. For IRB approval I created an Intake Form (Appendix B) and a Consent Form (Appendix C). The intake form

requested the student's demographic information. They were asked to give me their year in school, major and gender. They were asked to check a box if they were first-generation, low-income or an underrepresented minority student. Additionally, students who identified as underrepresented minority students were asked to specifically identify which cultural or ethnic group they identified with. The consent form I was used was standard and modeled after an example on the IRB website.

The sample consisted of 15 first-year and sophomore students in the TRIO program in the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) at the University of Minnesota (U of M). Participants were recruited from all and sophomore students in CEHD's TRIO program. Specifically, my research criteria were that each student must be from at least one underrepresented student population; they must be first-year or sophomore students; they had taken the StrengthsQuest assessment; and they knew their top 5 Strengths. I was looking for students that were low-income, first-generation and/or from an underrepresented minority group. Using the TRIO program office meant that every student in the program has already been "officially" identified by the government as belonging to at least one of those groups.

During spring semester, 2013, an email was sent on my behalf to all students meeting my criteria (or sophomores in CEHD's TRIO program). In this message I introduced myself and my research, and asked them if they would meet with me for a maximum of one hour in exchange for \$20. Twenty-six students responded to the email from the TRIO office and contacted me regarding their interest in participating in my

study. I responded to each student who had an interest in meeting with me. Eighteen students set up appointments. Once the appointment was set up, I sent them a confirmation email with both the intake form and the consent form so they could review them beforehand. I also send a reminder email to each student the day before each interview. Fifteen of those eighteen showed up and completed the interview. All interviews were concluded by March 15th, 2013.

Of the participants, the vast majority of the students were female (87%). All but one of the students (93%) were first-generation (no one in their immediate family had a bachelor's degree). Almost three quarters of the students (73%) were low-income (eligible for federal Pell grants). Almost all students (93%) identified themselves as a student of color. And most of those students (93% of students of color, 87% of total sample population) were students from underrepresented minority groups. This is in comparison to the University of Minnesota where 24.4% of students are students of color and the College of Education and Human Development where 28.5 % of the students are students of color (Office of Institutional Research, University of Minnesota, 2011).

Table 1: Ethnicity of Interview Participants

Major Ethnic Group	Sub-group	# of Students
African	<i>Liberian</i>	1
	<i>Somali</i>	3
Asian	<i>Vietnamese</i>	1
	<i>Thai</i>	1
	<i>Hmong</i>	1
	<i>Filipino</i>	1
	<i>Chinese</i>	1
Hispanic	<i>Mexican</i>	1
	<i>Peruvian</i>	1
	<i>Puerto Rican, Dominican, and Cuban</i>	1
	<i>Not specified</i>	1
Native American	<i>Chippewa</i>	1
White	<i>Not specified</i>	1
Total		15

Source: Personal interviews with participants.

Interviews

In the hour time frame we covered the intake form, the consent form and the interview. The interview was semi-structured and included eleven questions (Appendix D). Five of those questions had follow-up questions. In all but one instance we completed the interview. In that one case I ended the interview at the one hour mark. I

had the questions printed out for the students to review. I also had cards with the short definitions of their strengths on the table for reference. After the eleven questions, I asked students if they had any questions. I also asked them if I could share some of the thoughts that came to me as I listened to them talk about their strengths and their experiences. At the conclusion of the interview, each student signed a sheet saying they met with me for the interview and that I had given them \$20.

In the interview I asked students questions that related their top 5 strengths to their personal, academic and career spheres. Personally, I wanted to know if students felt their top 5 strengths were a reflection of their true self as well as how their top 5 influence how they interact with others. Academically, I wanted to know if students had spoken with someone on campus about their top 5. I also wanted to know if students connected their top 5 to their academic struggles and achievements. In terms of career, I wanted to know if students connected their choice of major, career or future work environment to their top 5 Strengths.

In reviewing students' answers, I looked for evidence of self-efficacy. It is important to note that a student connecting their top 5 Strengths to their personal, academic or career spheres is not taken as a proxy for self-efficacy. Rather, asking these questions provided a space where the student could provide evidence of self-efficacy. I do not propose that students are or are not developing self-efficacy as a result of taking the StrengthsQuest assessment, but rather that their answers do or do not display self-efficacy.

I did one pilot interview in conjunction with an Action Research class I was taking. That interview went well and according to plan so I have included it with the results of all interviews. To find pilot participants I went to a section of an introductory biology course in the department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning that only CEHD TRIO students enroll in. I introduced myself and my research and asked if anyone would be willing to pilot an interview with me. One student offered to pilot the interview. With the exception of the consent form, I used the same protocol in the pilot interview that I did with all of the other the interviews. The consent form for the pilot interview was specific to the Action Research class I was taking.

My eleven research questions are a result of a long process of revisions. First, I created a draft list of questions. Next, I met with my advisors to review and revise the questions. Additionally, as a part of my Action Research class I further revised them based on best practices for interviewing subjects. In all, the questions underwent five revisions.

Results and Analysis

Data Analysis Procedures

This was a basic qualitative interpretive research study (Merriam, 2002). Through semi-structured interviews I sought to learn how these students experienced their personal, academic and career spheres through the lens of their top 5 Strengths. I chose qualitative interviews as the way to examine the students' experiences because they are richly descriptive stories. My goal was to see if students provided evidence of self-

efficacy when they connected their top 5 strengths to their personal, academic and career spheres.

All humans have biases and shortcomings that might impact their research (Merriam, 2002). Another researcher might have influenced the interviews in a different manner (i.e. asking different follow-up questions for clarity). Or they might have pulled out different themes and codes and interpreted the data differently. I was the only interviewer. I was also the only person reviewing the content of the interviews, picking out themes and defining and assigning codes. I did consult with my advisors, but for all intents and purposes, I was the only person reviewing the interviews. It is also important to state that I believe in a strength-based approach and the value it brings to students' personally, academically and in terms of their careers.

In my first analysis of the interviews, I reviewed all the interviews looking for the following themes. First, did the students accept the strength label as an accurate representation of themselves? Second, did the students give examples of how the strength represents them? Third, did the students demonstrate their strength, but not connect it to the label? And lastly, did students misunderstand the strength definition?

In my second analysis of the interview I pulled out all the examples where students met the first set of themes. I then reviewed all the examples again and started a second list of themes I saw recurring in multiple interviews. This second list was developed into my final set of codes. With the final set of codes I read each interview

again and assigned codes to sections of the interviews where applicable. I used the free software RQDA to code the interviews.

Findings

In all I had 17 codes that fell into 6 broad categories. My broad categories were Self-Concept, Goals, Academics, Career, First-Generation, and Social. I used all 6 code categories in my findings and analysis. Within the code categories I used 11 of the 17 sub-codes in my findings and analysis. These 11 codes were the strongest in that they reflected the greatest number of students whose comments could be categorized into that specific code and sub-code.

Table 2: Coding Categories from Interviews

Code Category	Code Sub-Category
Self-Concept	Self-concept
Goals	Set and achieve goals.
	Overcome obstacles.
	Strong desire to succeed.
Academics	Academic self-efficacy.
	Strategy for academic success.
	Group work.
Career	Career
First-Generation	Overcoming challenges as first-generation students.
	Importance of family support
Social	Integrate into campus.

Source: Personal interviews with participants.

Self-Concept

In analyzing the responses of the participants in this study, the strongest theme that came out was Self-Concept. If students met this theme they saw their top 5 strengths as a reflection of themselves. All students found at least some value in at least some of their top 5 strengths; some really connected with all five. Some students didn't connect to a strength or two. In some cases this was a misunderstanding of what the strength was. For example, one student, Joe, thought Deliberative meant being social. Joe is quite introverted and not a social person. However, in talking with me, he really exemplified the Deliberative strength. He made careful observations, had a small group of close friends, was vigilant and spent a lot of time assessing social and academic situations. In another case, Ilhaan didn't identify with the strength Woo. Others around her see her as social, but she doesn't see herself that way. In talking to her it seemed that her nature is social, but the stress of starting college and succeeding really pushed her social nature backstage. She is a sophomore and as she becomes more accustomed to the rigors and demands of college, her true nature is shining through.

Students made comments that showed how much they do think their top 5 strengths are representations of who they are. These comments reflected how the students see themselves. They said things like "I am..."; "I am drawn to..."; "I always try to..."; and "[Fill in strength] definitely describes me." Students also talked about how their strengths influence how they move around in the world: "I definitely like to be the person who...."; "It helps me..."; "It explains why..." In connecting their top 5 strengths

to themselves students gave great examples of how an individual strength really fits them.

The students below exemplify the answers students gave when connecting their top 5 strengths to themselves.

Gabriela: “ For instance, for me the top two were the Includer and Empathy because I always try, for me, I always try to be open minded about everyone and make sure that they’re not left out because then I feel bad even if I’ve never talked to them before” (Interview_11 [515: 2337]).

Isabella: “Oh yeah, Responsibility too. Yeah. Yeah, Responsibility, that’s a big one, Responsibility. I think a lot of my positive feedback comes to that because I will just work-wise and school-wise I want to do my best. I want to strive for the best because I want to do the best, you know? So I think a lot of it comes from Responsibility. Yeah, that’s a good one for this category because it drives me. I want people to be able to rely on me so as far as doing good in a group project, I want people to know that I’m not just gonna slack around and not do anything good” (Interview__2 [11255:11838]).

Gabriella and Isabella are just two of the fifteen students who really connected to their top 5 strengths. All students saw themselves reflected in at least a couple of their top 5 strengths and were able to describe how those strengths fit them.

Goals

The second strongest theme was Goals with 11 participants connected their top 5 strengths to goals. Based on participant responses I generated 3 codes related to goals: Student uses a strength to set and achieve goals; Student uses a strength to overcome an obstacle; and Student has a strong desire to succeed in college and connects their ability to do so with a strength.

Set and achieve goals.

We know that students who believe they can accomplish something, set a goal, and then work towards that goal, have higher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1993). Self-efficacy and goals-setting feed into each other with a positive feedback loop. Self-efficacy leads to higher goals-setting. High goal-setting feeds back into self-efficacy. Students who enter college with confidence in their ability to set goals and achieve them with do better academically (Chemers et al., 2001).

Almost all students (93%) are first-generation. A couple students connected the struggles they went through to apply and be accepted at the university to their top 5 strengths. Their strengths helped them manage an extremely complex process, often with no help or oversight. Isabella, a Hispanic student, is a first-generation and low-income student. She recounted specific ways that she set and achieved goals to get admitted to the university. The quote does not reflect it, but she managed the application process alone. She did not have anyone she could rely on or who was helping her through the process.

Isabella: “Getting to the U of M would be an academic goal that I completed.”

Interviewer: “Okay and so how did your top five Strengths help you to achieve getting in the University?”

Isabella: “How did they? I think that all of them honestly played a role.

Responsibility was getting good grades and making sure I maintained a good GPA and like I said before, a good college application résumé, you know - balancing with work and school, family and friends. Adaptability – if I failed a test, that was gonna bring down my grade in a class and I had to work my way around that and say I obviously need to study more next time, definitely. And then I took two really hard Science classes in my last year in 12th grade. It was Anatomy, CIS Anatomy, just College in Schools Anatomy and Physics and that

was just hard so I had to adapt to make sure I fit those grades and got at least Bs in those” (Interview__2 [12365:13255]).

Students also gave examples of pushing themselves to do more than the minimum. They set goals above what the school or their advisor said they would need.

Ana, an undecided sophomore reflected on why she chose to take American Sign

Language even though she didn’t need it.

Ana: “I feel like my strength of being an Achiever makes me, well helped me to decide, that I wanted to take ASL as one of my classes. I don’t know. My adviser said something like “You don’t really need that.” And I was like, “I really want to take it. I really feel like I should know it.” I don’t feel like people that have disadvantages should always have to accommodate to the general population...I just want to be that thing that people don’t have when they are going through things...”(Interview_12 [10705:11337]).

Or take Gabriela who wanted to get the most out of the opportunity she has to attend the university. She is not interested in just getting by – she wants to do well and she uses her Discipline strength to achieve that.

Gabriela:” Even to graduate... you only need a 2.5 to graduate. A lot of people they settle and they don’t try to keep increasing it. I don’t want to do that. I don’t want to be like “Ah, well, I only need a 2.5, so...” And a lot of people, like my friends’ parents, they’re like, “I only got a 2.0 and I graduated and I’m working for this large firm, blah, blah, blah.” And I’m like, “Okay, that’s great. I’m glad you got ahead but I don’t want to do that.” Because I’m paying so much money, I might as well just go to a tech school, get that 2.0. I just feel like since I’m privileged to be at this Big Ten school, why would I just settle for the least?”(Interview_11 [16006:16713]).

A couple of students reflected on the goals they had to get into competitive programs or colleges at the university. These goals were often specific (what gpa they needed) and were accompanied by concrete steps to take in order to get into the program

or college. Ilhaan, a first-year student who wants to major in Biology shared the following:

Ilhaan: “In the future, I feel like medical school is a big academic goal, but even just this semester I applied to CBS, like that’s a more recent academic goal. It’s really hard to get into.”

Interviewer: “It is. So, let’s take applying to CBS because that’s closer to the present where we are right now. How did your top five Strengths help you in the application process to College of Biological Sciences?”

Ilhaan: “Once I figured out the whole different colleges that are on campus, which was like the second week of school. I was using my Futuristic; I already went on the CBS website, already bookmarked it, saved it; and seeing the qualifications of how many classes of science I need to be taking and the GPA that is required, and that the deadline is March. So, basically, I already knew this from September and I’ve been just been working up toward it, so Futuristic was really just used throughout the whole thing” (Interview_6 [6853: 7792]).

Or students would rely on their strengths to set boundaries that would help them succeed academically. Usually this took the form of some kind of structure in their routine that would help them meet their goals. Samatar, a young Somali man, both first-generation and low-income, found a way to use his Focus strength to make sure he attended class. Someone from University Counseling and Consulting Services told him that the strongest correlation between good grades and doing well in school was with class attendance. He was intent on making sure he attended every class. Here he talks about using his Focus strength to get past the distractions that would keep him from attending class and doing well in school.

“Okay, I’ve used my Focus [strength] to actually focus myself on my schedule and say “Okay, I can’t be doing this. I have to go to class.” That’s how I do it and I haven’t missed any class. I mean, I’ve negotiated with myself so many times saying “Oh, you can just miss this one class and then focus on this assignment that’s more important in this class.” But then I tell myself “No, you’re just going to get yourself in the same habit as last semester and if you do this it would be a

slippery slope. Just don't do it, don't even think about it." Even though I've had reasonable excuses to miss class to myself, not reasonable to my teacher probably, so I've negotiated with myself but I haven't given in. I've been going to my classes so far" (Interview_13 [13853:14597]).

Overcome obstacles.

All students in college are going to face challenges and obstacles in their path.

These obstacles may be social, academic, monetary or personal in nature.

Underrepresented students, for a variety of reasons previously mentioned, face additional hurdles at the college level. Whether or not students are able to overcome these challenges and succeed to graduation in college will to some extent depend on their self-efficacy. Students with higher self-efficacy believe they can surmount obstacles by modifying their environment. A student with high self-efficacy will persevere through obstacles even in environments with limited opportunity (Bandura, 1993).

The obstacles participants mentioned were academic in nature or they reflected social or family obligations that could distract them from meeting their academic responsibilities. Academically, students sometimes struggled with a class. Classes can be challenging for a number of reasons: the content of the course is hard; the ways in which you have to demonstrate your knowledge may not be good fit; or professors may not be accessible to answer questions and offer support. Two students offer ways they used their strengths to overcome an obstacle to their success in a class. They both used their Competition strength to motivate themselves when they were really struggling with a class.

Haldhaa: “I know I did say I’m not really competitive, but like now that I’m taking this math course, it’s like really hard. And I always try to compete with my friend on exam scores. I don’t say it to her face but on the inside I’m happy when I do better than her because she usually does better than me” (Interview_10 [10837:11130]).

Theresa:” I have to say this is when Competition and Achiever came into play. I have a roommate and we took a summer college class together and we always kind of, it wasn’t a said competition but it was, it was known. We always competed...So we had this little unsaid competition going on for chemistry and obviously she ended up winning because she got a better (slightly better grade) than me. But, just the Competition and my drive to achieve in this class, like overcome this hard class. Chemistry is hard for me and then it’s online. I have a crappy professor. It was all up to me to get the grade that I wanted because nobody else was trying to help me with that. So having the competition of somebody else made me work harder, well, twice as hard to achieve” (Interview_9 [9205:10179]).

And Gabriela used her Discipline strength to build up the courage to speak publicly. Speaking in front of people did not come naturally to her, but she knew to be successful in her major, Business Management, she needs to be comfortable do it.

Gabriela: “The most I’ve used it so far was when I did the—well, for business management we had take a public speaking classes. But I did it so that I could kind of discipline myself because I don’t like speaking in front of people. I kind of used the Discipline strength for that, to work my way up to having the courage to do it. Because as a business major you have to, that’s the one thing you do, you speak with a lot of people. So I wanted to have the confidence and I feel like when taking the Public Speaking it helped”(Interview_11 [6713: 7357]).

First-generation, low-income, and students from minority groups often have family responsibilities that they must meet in addition to their academic responsibilities. To be successful academically, a student must find a way to meet their family obligations in addition to academic ones. Although the example obstacles are not unique to first-generation, low-income and minority students, they do exemplify the struggles these

students populations encounter. Gabriela, a Hispanic sophomore who is both first-generation and low-income, had a death in the family and she used her Discipline strength to meet both familial and academic responsibilities.

Gabriela:” I would have to say it was last semester dealing with—there was a death in my family...I emailed all of my professors because I didn’t know if I’d be gone or not from classes. So they all knew what was going on, but I still showed up to class and I still was there and emailing them and getting my homework in on time. And they all commended me on it because they said if it was them they said they wouldn’t have gone to class...I did leave for a week and I still was handing in all of my homework. I got it in on time because I just feel like, I still have my own time to be upset about it, but I have to keep going because this is my future that I’m doing. I just think that, so that was really helpful that I was able to do that because otherwise I think if I had been in high school or middle school I would have just been like “I don’t care. I’ll focus on my family.” I was able to focus on both and that’s what I really like. I was able to keep structure, discipline myself to do both at the same time” (Interview_11 [12491:13730]).

Another student, Theresa, who identified herself as African – Liberian, and is also both first-generation and low-income, used a couple of her strengths to help support her best friend and turn her homework in on time. Her friend’s dad was in the hospital and because of her Relator strength it was important for Theresa to support her. She still had to turn her assignments in and she used her Adaptability strength to do so.

Theresa: “And this played a good role. Last night I got a call from my friend that her dad had a heart attack and was in the hospital...So I sat there and I was just like “Shoot, I have two papers due tonight.” It was like eight o’clock when I got the text message. So I had to make sure I was being smart about this and also trying to be there for her. So I asked her if there was Wi-Fi at the hospital, ‘cause I had to submit my papers online, electronically. So I’m like well, I mean being there doesn’t mean I have to just sit there and be all up in her face. Just being there helps. So I went there with my laptop and my backpack looking like a student. And after saying “Hi” to her dad and her family we sat in the waiting room, I typed up my paper...I’m just like well, had to make sure I can still submit

my paper while being there for her and it worked out” (Interview_9 [23347:25028]).

Or in the case of Ana, her lack of family support presented significant challenges to her while in high school. Her parents are divorced and her dad had remarried. His new wife was not interested in parenting her and was so adamant about her dislike of Ana that she was forced to move in with her mother. Her mother had never been “a mother” to her and living with her was a challenge. Ana did end up moving back to live with a friend. Here’s how she describes using her Positivity strength to get through that challenging time:

Ana:” I don’t let things that I can’t control affect me. Like I couldn’t control that my dad didn’t want me. I couldn’t control my mom’s attitude. I couldn’t control those things. That was just them and I knew that and so I would just say, ‘Okay. Just breathe, take it day by day.’ I don’t know. I guess looking back at it, going day to day I didn’t think it was as awful as it is now”(Interview_12 [22395:22787]).

Strong desire to succeed.

College is a commitment and a challenge. It is an expensive, long-term commitment that most low-income, first-generation, and minority students cannot pay for out of pocket. Many students talked about the importance of finishing college. It was important to finish college to have “the good life” of financial security and so that they were able to provide for their family. While not all first-generation students are low-income students, in my sample two thirds of the students were both low-income and first-generation. Almost three quarters (73%) of students were low-income. The dire economic circumstances stated in the Introduction are first-hand experiences for these

students and their families. Doing well in college will give them a leg up as they try to move from low-income or working class to the middle class. Three students address the importance of getting a degree while showcasing their strengths.

Samatar: “Significance, I always like to do things that would fulfill me and that are not mundane. For instance that’s why I came here to college. That’s why I didn’t get a normal wage job where I get paid by the hour. I could have easily gone that route but I did not. I want to be significant because I love it when what I’m doing actually accomplishes something. I don’t want to just finish my undergrad. I want to continue school and get a masters, maybe doctorate” (Interview_13 [1941: 2400]).

Ellie:” Again with the Futuristic strength I think about the future and I stay because I think that if I do finish college and get a degree I’ll be better set and happier cause I’ll have more choices what to do with my life versus if I quit I get stuck in a job I really didn’t like” (Interview_3 [7097: 7385]).

Interviewer: Okay. Yeah, that’s a good example of Competition. If you go through the rest of your college career and you have B’s or higher for grades, what would that mean to you to achieve that?

Haldhaa: Probably, I guess perseverance because I’m not only doing the grades because I want to get good grades. I’m doing it to prove something to myself that college is, I guess, defeatable. You can get through it. It’s not something that’s impossible. I guess I just want to prove to people that it’s not impossible and no matter where you come from you can always succeed in college” (Interview_10 [11888:12477]).

Students also reflected on how important it was to their parents that they finish college. Since all but one student is first-generation, their parents often do not understand the challenges the students face. Even though they are not sure what college is like, their parents provided emotional support to the students. Student recounted their parents telling them they were proud of them that they were in college. Or their parents told them they knew they could succeed and graduate. With one exception in my sample, all students who were from an underrepresented minority (13) were also first-generation.

This means that in my sample 12 students (80%) were both first-generation and from an underrepresented minority group. Research has shown the importance of parental support for underrepresented minority students (Dennis et al., 2005; Kao & Thompson, 2003; Nora & Cabrera, 1996). It was clear in my interviews that the support from their parents means a lot to these students.

Ana: I'd have to say my parents more so than not having a degree or anything and us being low-income. It's kind of like I've taken more of the Discipline than anything because I want to make them proud. So it's like I want to focus. I try not to get too distracted even though I don't always succeed, but try not to get too distracted from my school work and have decent enough grades where I'm not failing but I'm at least trying my hardest, if it's like a tough class. So that they're happy because my accomplishment in the end is basically their accomplishment because they got me here and they're the ones—since they couldn't get their degree they're kind of going through me to get it, kind of deal. That's how I feel more so with my parents because they're the ones that are the most important ones that I make sure that I'm always pleasing or whatnot" (Interview_11 [9417:10282]).

In telling me how important it is to his family that he succeed as well as how much they support him, Joe referenced his Futuristic, Achiever, Learner and Deliberative strengths.

Interviewer: Okay. Question five. Your parents, professors, advisers and friends have expectations of you. So, think about an expectation that somebody has of you and give an example of how you used a top five Strength to meet an expectation that somebody had of you.

Joe:" I guess from my family, it's just finishing college and finding a good job. So, basically all this implements it. They always look to the future as well, so I think I got that from them. So, like, they always thought of like if this is good for me or not. And we talk like a family; we just sit down at the table and talk about the future and what I need to achieve. And I learn from them. My parents are hard workers and they never gave up on anything, so I think all those traits that they have build all these Strengths that I have right now. I think that's how they do it, that's how they do it. Just talk to my parents and then looking at it....there's this term "looking at the balcony", like putting yourself out and then just looking at

what you do and what you need to do, the past and stuff, so just examining everything and then trying to like put a whole concept. That's how I learn things" (Interview_8 [6391: 7596]).

In all, almost three fourths (73%) of the students connected their top 5 strengths to their goals. These goals were related to academics, their future careers or their personal relationships. These students, by combining their top 5 strengths to their goals, are certainly on their way to earning their degrees.

Academics

Students come to college for many different reasons and from many different places. Regardless of their reasons, most students are here to earn a degree. To earn a degree a student needs to succeed academically over a long period of time. They will face greater academic challenges than they did in high school. Much of their ability to succeed lies in their agency, or the actions they take on behalf of themselves, to meet the academic challenges they face. Self-efficacy, the goal plus the agency, has been related to persistence and achievement in educational settings (Chemers et al., 2001). If we want to see increased academic achievement from students we need to increase their self-efficacy.

In answering my questions all 15 students connected their top 5 strengths to their successes and challenges related to academics so they fell under the code category of Academics. Under this umbrella I have three academic sub-codes: Student demonstrated academic self-efficacy and connects it to a strength; Student has identified a strategy for

academic success and connects it to a strength; and Student is successful in academic group work and connects it to a strength.

Academic self-efficacy.

In their answers 12 students (80%) demonstrated academic self-efficacy and connected it to a strength. A student's academic success often depended on them planning. This related to long-term planning like using the graduation planner or meeting with an adviser to talk about their four-year plan. Three students specifically mentioned strengths in how they choose their classes. They wanted to choose classes that were appropriate for their level in school, but that were not too easy. They wanted a challenge.

Zer: "I would like to say Achiever. That helps me in a way to figure out my classes...I want something that's challenging, that is outside of my comfort zone, something I can learn something from and apply to my life or something that I'm interested in"(Interview_7 [4767: 5216]).

Planning also related to how students succeeded in their classes. The importance of prioritizing and scheduling time to study was echoed in many student responses. Finishing homework, reading materials ahead of time, taking online practice quizzes and shutting of distractions like Facebook were all strategies employed by students to succeed academically.

Paola: "And Achiever I would use it for every class because I always try to do all my homework and to have it done and sometimes it's a lot. And I feel like it's a lot of pressure sometimes. There are days I feel like, 'Oh, my gosh this is a lot,' and so I always say like, 'Oh, I have to finish it. I have to remember what I'm here for'" (Interview_5 [6620: 6954]).

Lien: "Like I said, I try to finish stuff beforehand. I try to read before class so that when I go to the lecture, everything that the professor says in class won't new and shock to me. I try to take my quizzes, those online quizzes, by myself so that I can

get more of a sense when we have a quiz or a test in class like a pop one, and I won't get scared and panic a lot" (Interview__1 [14785:15152]).

Students that showed evidence of academic self-efficacy advocated for themselves. Ana doesn't wait for someone else to help her recover from setbacks. She uses her Positivity strength and writes positive sticky-note messages where she will see them and get back on track. Ellie used her Analytical strength to proactively seek information about potential classes beyond the course guide. And Brooke uses Harmony to talk to her professors about potential extra credit opportunities.

Brooke: "Right now I am in German and I know I didn't do that well on my last quiz. I actually just asked him if there are any areas that I can get extra credit. I guess that would be a good example. We both talked about the options of extra credit that I could do and things that I wouldn't necessarily enjoy doing versus things that I would. It was a really good conversation" (Interview_14 [10217:10856]).

Strategies for success.

To separate out the difference between students who had the agency piece of the puzzle and acted on their own behalf, and those that could see a strategy or an action, but hadn't put it into action, I created the second code, Strategy for Success. Slightly more students, 13 (80%), connected a strategy for academic success to a strength. As students talked about academic failures and challenges I asked them how they could use their strengths in the future or could have used their strengths to handle a past situation differently.

Student responses to how they could use their strengths to achieve goals or overcome obstacles went in two directions. First students looked to their relationships

with gatekeepers; advisors, professors and tutors. They talked about asking for help, seeking more sources of help and visiting office hours. Eliza, a first-generation and low-income Chinese student, thought about how her Relator strength could help her build relationships with her professors, something that would come easily to her once she knocked on that professor's door. And May, a first-generation Thai student, connected her Relator strength to a broad swath of people she could look to that would help her overcome a challenge.

Eliza: "I actually think that's a really good idea. You can talk to your professors and tell them what's going on and maybe they can relate. If you're struggling with the class maybe they can help you focus on what you need to work on in particular in that class. I didn't really think of that" (Interview_15 [17584:17886]).

May: "I think I should talk to more people about that, not just my academic adviser, but go to the Career Services, talk to people in the field that I'm interested in; do volunteering. I just went to the Volunteer Services at Appleby Hall to ask them to help me find opportunities about that. So I think I would have to get up and do something more instead of being lazy and not doing anything" (Interview_4 [12137:12540]).

In the second group, when students reflected on how they could leverage their strengths to overcome an academic challenge, they looked to themselves. They often used words that reflected personal responsibility for the choices they make and how that will affect their success. Students mentioned studying more and better (no cramming), and making sure they knew what was due *and* handing homework in on time. They also talked about reducing distractions. Students clearly identified what the distractions were, they just needed to take action to be self-efficacious. Lien, a first-year Vietnamese

student who came from a first-generation and low-income background, easily connected her Responsibility strength to actions she could take to do better in class.

Lien: “Responsibility – you need to be responsible for what you do like do your homework, figure out what you’re missing in class right beforehand.
[Adaptability] – get used to the way your teacher teaches you because none of them are the same. They all have their own thing; you have to get used to it. You either live with it or die.
One last note is that there were not either or groups. Students saw both paths, working with gatekeepers and taking personal responsibility, as ways to succeed in school” (Interview__1 [11980:12324]).

Group work.

Question 8 asked students how their top 5 strengths helped them succeed interpersonally. 5 students (1/3 of the sample) used group work in class to answer this question. Our society is becoming more global and technology is erasing borders that used to divide. Students are being called on to work with others. As our nation becomes increasingly more diverse, our students are going to be asked to work with others from very different backgrounds, cultures and that may have different values. One student, Joe, talked about how important of a bridge the language of strengths was for him and other students. Joe is a Filipino immigrant and from both a low-income and first-generation background. He sometimes didn’t have breakfast and knew that most students in his class did not have similar backgrounds. The language of strengths “helped him to get along with most of the people, like have a common ground, I guess” (Interview_8 [2154:4809]). Talking about strengths with other created a connection with them he would not have otherwise had. Other students talked about how their strengths brought something unique to the table; they filled a role that was lacking and important to the

success of their group. They were proud of what they accomplished and how they helped their group. Gabriela uses all of her strengths when she works in groups.

Gabriela:” ...My Stats class last semester we had a group project and we were all very different. There was one certain person that he was just the leader and he wanted to do everything on his own because he said ‘If you want something done, do it right, you have to do it yourself’ type of model. I mean when you work in a group it doesn’t work like that. So it was really tough because even though I’m not a leader it still kind of irritated me because you have to include everyone and you have to, like everyone has some type of potential. So the Includer and Developer for instance, I used instantly. And then kind of talking to my group as a whole and trying to solve the problem by letting them know how we—because it was four people and three of us thought the same and he was the only one and he didn’t see it. And it was because no one ever told him what he was doing; working in a group it doesn’t work that way. So, I mean kind of like working together, we weren’t rude about it or anything. We just let him know how we felt and I think that just worked a great advantage. We were able to pass. We got one of the best grades in the class and it was just, I don’t like stats so it was nice that I was able to pass a class with a great grade because of my group. It was due to them that I was able to pass. It was kind of like a mixture of all my top five Strengths, kind of using them” (Interview_11 [21579:23002]).

In conclusion, in the interviews not all students demonstrated self-efficacy by combining their belief in what they can accomplish with actions on their behalf towards what they want to achieve. However, under the code category of Academics (including all three sub-categories), all students in some way connected their top 5 strengths to their academic successes and challenges.

Career

Self-efficacy is related to career outcomes for students because their efficacy beliefs are the foundation for their future career options. The greater a student’s efficacy beliefs, the more career options they consider, the harder they will work to prepare for that career, and the greater number of career options they will consider (Bandura, 1993).

I asked two questions related to their future careers. The first question asked students to connect their top 5 strengths to their class and major choices. Students were also asked what kind of a work environment they thought would be a good fit for them. In answering the questions students gave answers that were general to a work environment. (Students didn't always specifically name their strength when answering the question. If they did not specifically list the strength, I have included it in parentheses before the quote.)

Eliza (Discipline and Adaptability): “Well, a lot of the jobs that I’ve had I really enjoyed it because of the people that I worked with were very laid back. They were laid back, but they also got their work done. Its fun working with people who have a sense of humor and people that you can joke around with and also get your work done at the same time. I really enjoy working with those kinds of people because work doesn’t always have to be boring, it can be fun, too. So enjoying your work while you do it” (Interview_15 [16570:17059]).

Ilhaan (Restorative, Communication, and Futuristic): “I feel like it would be a place where I could solve problems pretty easily and...because the way I think of problems are like puzzles. And one fits and the problem goes away. So, a place where I could solve problems pretty easily. A place where I can communicate problems or plans like to people pretty easily. A place where it’s not like a dead-end job. Somewhere that I can think for the future. Somewhere that will expand like a career path that is never just stuck in one area, I guess” (Interview_6 [12904:13410]).

Zer: “I use Futuristic because I don’t want to major in something that isn’t going to hire me in four years, four to six years. So I think about my graduation year which is 2016. I think about what are the demands of jobs. So, I use Futuristic to research what majors that I’m interested in will be hiring people in 2016 and after that” (Interview_7 [4158: 4504]).

Some students named very specific careers that were a good fit for them. In the case of May, she used her top 5 to eliminate a career path that would not have been a good long-term fit for her.

Ilhaan: “Well, I already knew what career I wanted to go into, but thinking back now I feel like there’s some things that naturally fit into my career. I want to be a general surgeon, I guess, so that’s like a doctor, and I feel like that Restorative could be really used for that. It’s solving problems quickly, and Futuristic, thinking ahead, and Communication because it doesn’t matter what field you’re in -- especially if you’re a doctor, you’ve got to communicate to the patient, got to communicate to the nurses, so...” (Interview_6 [4238: 4770]).

Brooke: “Again, I would say I’ve always known that I’m a people person. One of my favorite things to do is to recognize what people are feeling, their emotions. I instantly know if someone has something on their mind that they want to get off or anything like that. So I’ve always been interested in theater because of that. I can always look at a script and pull those emotions out of each character, so theater has always been my focus. I’m also hoping to minor in fashion studies. I guess that would be Woo too, pleasing people with beautiful garments. I guess I would want to do gowns and stuff if I went into that, I’m not sure if I want to or not” (Interview_14 [3551: 4216]).

May: “Yeah, for one thing, for example, Harmony – like I said before that I don’t like to do any debates or participate in anything like that. So actually I was interested a little in law school. But yeah, since I gave it a thought and I think that I’m not going to feel very comfortable about that. I don’t actually like public speaking much so that kind of pointed me into another direction” (Interview_4 [3283: 3685]).

All students were successful in connecting their top 5 strengths to their future work environments.

First-generation status

With one exception, all students in this sample are first-generation students. None of my questions centered on their experiences as first-generation students. However, being a first-generation student is a part of their identity and affects their campus experience. When coding interviews, I found two themes related to first-generation status: Challenges students face as first-generation students, and Importance of family support.

Overcoming challenges as first-generation students.

One big challenge for slightly more than one quarter (26%) of students in the sample was that they did not have parental support. There are many reasons for this, but the important point is to know that these students were not getting help from home. When they shared these struggles they talked about how they overcame them and related their ability to do so with their top 5 strengths. In some cases, like Ana and Isabella, their parents had checked out of the parental role they should be filling. Ana connected her ability to overcome this with her Positivity strength. Isabella overcame this challenge by using her Responsibility strength at a young age. Samatar's mother figure is his aunt, but she is currently in Somalia and unable to provide him any kind of daily support. He looks to his Focus strength to provide the academic support he needs.

In some cases, like Gabriela and Theresa, their parents support them emotionally, but don't know how to support them academically. They both tied their ability to provide academic support for themselves with their top 5 strengths.

Theresa: "So that has followed me all the way through my middle school and my high school years and even though I'm now responsible for my grade here because nobody is like "I'm going to go check your grade and you're going to be grounded if you don't have good grades." I still hold myself to that high standard. You need to achieve nothing lower than a C. Don't even try to get a C. It has just been ingrained in me to be an Achiever, do the best you can, give 100%" (Interview_9 [6303: 6761]).

Another big challenge for slightly more than one quarter (26%) of students in the sample is that they are immigrant students. This means that for these students (not all immigrant students) they are underrepresented students in three ways: first-generation,

low-income and they are underrepresented minority students. These students have had to adapt to a new language, culture and academic expectations. Each student tied his/her success to one of their top 5 strengths. Ilhaan uses her Restorative and Communication strengths to fill in the gaps her parent's knowledge leaves. Joe's Futuristic strength keeps him focused on his long-term goals while providing him with the motivation to get past the obstacles of his family immigrating to the United States from the Philippines. Lien uses her Adaptability strength to feel comfortable in our American culture that is very different from her home Vietnamese culture.

Lien: "Adaptation is also a big one because when I first came here, I know nothing. I didn't know any single word of English so I started learning the first day I walked into middle school here. And why I say adapt because the culture here and the culture in my family and back in my country is completely different. I spent my 14 years in Vietnam which is why there is somehow a lot of traditional culture in me. And when I'm here, of course, I'm culture shocked. Like walking to school and seeing kids wearing naughty clothes, holding hands, making out – stuff like that – that's never, ever allowed to happen in my country before. And I was like in my head a big question mark just there. But I get used to it, like mind my own business – that's what they do. Everyone has a different opinion and thinking. And I started learning English and now I get to the American way – speak freely, don't be afraid of anything, get more comfortable myself" (Interview__1 [1678: 2624]).

Importance of family support.

Not all first-generation students are from underrepresented minority groups. In my sample, one student was not first-generation and all but two (different students) were from underrepresented minority groups. So, for the vast majority of students (80%) in my sample, they were both first-generation and from an underrepresented minority group. For a variety of reasons previously explained these students face additional barriers to

succeeding in higher education. Dennis (2005) found that once on campus, support from peers and family is important to academic success for minority students. Peers on campus provide social support while family members provide emotional support. The importance of emotional support from their families was clear in these students' stories. Because they are first-generation students their parents often do not know how to support them academically. Despite this, many students (60%) found the significant amount of emotional support they received from their parents to be invaluable. The stories they shared about how important it is to them and their families to succeed were really heart-warming.

Gabriela wants to make her parents proud. They have sacrificed a lot for her. She uses her Discipline strength to make sure she is successful in college. Ellie's parents expect her to be in college and to do well. She wanted to quit, but instead used her Futuristic strength to inspire herself to keep going so she can make her parents proud. Paola uses her Responsibility strength to meet her parents' expectations that she does what is right and follows her dreams. Joe did an excellent job of weaving all of his strengths together to explain how he meets his parents' expectation that he finish college.

Joe: "I guess from my family, it's just finishing college and finding a good job. So, basically all this implements it. They always look to the future as well, so I think I got that from them. So, like, they always thought of like if this is good for me or not. And we talk like a family; we just sit down at the table and talk about the future and what I need to achieve. And I learn from them. My parents are hard workers and they never gave up on anything, so I think all those traits that they have build all these Strengths that I have right now. I think that's how they do it, that's how they do it. Just talk to my parents and then looking at it...there's this term "looking at the balcony", like putting yourself out and then just looking at what you do and what you need to do, the past and stuff, so just examining

everything and then trying to like put a whole concept. That's how I learn things" (Interview_8 [6391: 7596]).

Fourteen (93%) of the students were first-generation. These students all face additional obstacles to succeeding in college that their second-generation peers do not. Without being asked to speak about the important role their family plays, nine students (60%) volunteered that information and connected their top 5 strengths to how they meet their own and their parents' expectation that they graduate from college.

Using Strengths to Integrate into Campus

Whether a person integrates or finds their place on campus can ultimately determine whether they stay and graduate or drop out. As has been previously discussed, underrepresented students have a harder time integrating into campus. Although I didn't specifically ask students questions about integrating on campus, in answering question 8, "How have you been able to use your top 5 strengths to succeed interpersonally," (and through the interview process in general) six students (40%) gave answers that showed how they used their top 5 strengths to integrate on campus. While you might think students would use a relationship building strength to integrate on campus, a wide variety of strengths were cited as helping students find their place on campus.

I previously mentioned how Joe saw strengths as a bridge or connection to others who came from very different backgrounds. He used his Learner strength to figure out the ways or "rules" of campus life.

Joe: "Learner, just learning things about the campus, like the ways, like rules and stuff. I'm still not used to it yet. Freshman year is difficult. Kind of like that

bumpy road that you said. I'm still on that kind of road. So, kind of like getting out of it" (Interview_8 [12676:12932]).

Lien used her Command strength to actively participate in volunteer opportunities on campus. Because she was so helpful and drew others in to helping, she was asked to be on the board of a student group. Theresa used her Adaptability strength to lessen the stress of entering a foreign environment.

Theresa: "...The one that that has really helped me here at the university was Adaptability because I came from a school where, I like to say, it was pretty diverse. And by that I mean you could see each individual race represented in close amounts when it comes to percent. But coming to the U with a whole lot more students than I had at my school and a lot less diversity, that's something I had to deal with and I feel like if I didn't, if I wasn't as strong of an adaptor as say, some other people, I would have either dropped out or not been happy at the university. But, because of that I've been able to advocate for myself or even be bold enough to say that I feel like the university has a diversity problem or these are the problems I feel are wrong with the school" (Interview_9 [2353: 3131]).

In summary, students did use the language of strengths to describe themselves and what they do best. The students I interviewed are using their strengths on a daily basis to succeed in college. Students demonstrated how they use their strengths in academic, career and personal spheres. I did find evidence of self-efficacy. Although all students had met obstacles to succeeding in college, they all believed that they could surmount those obstacles and were taking action to make sure they did just that. In reflecting to answer my questions, students were able to connect their top 5 strengths to their successes.

Limitations

There are multiple limitations to note. Each participant self-selected to participate in this study. In addition, I gave all students \$20.00 for participating. Both of these factors could have influenced who decided to participate and the results. All participants came from the same program at the same university. If students were included from a variety of institutions, the results of the study might vary. Also, because the sample was predominantly female, it would be helpful to have more male participants. Due to the limitations in time it was not possible to further recruit more men to participate in the study. This study sample represented a diverse group of students, but the sub groups of students were not large enough to make meaningful analysis into such differences. All students were traditional aged college students who entered college right after high school. Including a wider range of students or students in different life stages might have generated different results. This study relies on student's narrative experiences which may or may not be reliable sources of collecting data. It also would be helpful to have a longitudinal study that looks at student's responses over time including before they took the StrengthsQuest assessment, while in their first two years, and as students approached college graduation. This would allow for studying the development of self-efficacy rather than whether I see evidence of self-efficacy. Also, there is a limitation with the StrengthsQuest assessment itself. We do not know if the StrengthsQuest assessment simply gives students a language that describes themselves as they have always known themselves to be or if having the language changes a student's behavior. Finally, there is

only one coder. It would be helpful to have multiple perspective and discussions around the codes and analysis of the interviews.

Discussion and Implications

We know that underrepresented students face additional hurdles to succeeding to degree completion in higher education (Dannells, 1993; Dumais & Ward, 2010; Ovink & Veazey, 2011). Underrepresented students are less likely to enroll in a postsecondary institution and they are less likely to graduate than traditional college students. There is research that examines various characteristics of underrepresented student populations and how they may or may not affect graduation rates (Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996)). There is also research on the benefits of a strength-based approach in many contexts, including post-secondary education (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Buckingham, 2010; Lopez et al., 2006; Schreiner, 2010; Smith, 2006; Wood et al., 2011). What is lacking in the literature is connecting a strength-based approach to increasing the graduation rates of underrepresented students.

I was interested in using a strengths-based approach to my research because many underrepresented students do succeed in college and persist to graduation. One factor that might influence the success of these students is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is the belief that you can accomplish a goal paired with the action required to achieve that goal (Bandura, 1993). If having high self-efficacy increases the probability of academic success and graduation, then finding ways to increase a student's self-efficacy might lead to increased success on campus and greater graduation rates.

One way we might increase a student's self-efficacy is to give them a language that describes their strengths. The StrengthsQuest assessment is designed for this purpose and all incoming first-year students at the University of Minnesota are currently taking this assessment. My research question connects a strengths-based approach to the self-efficacy of underrepresented students. I did not look at whether there was a causal relationship between a strengths-based approach and students' self-efficacy. Instead, through interviews, I examined the relationship between the language of strengths and the experiences of underrepresented students in academic, personal and career spheres.

I did hear students connecting their top 5 strengths to their experiences on campus. Students connected their strengths to their academic and personal lives as well as to their future careers. When students looked back at their successes they were able to see how they used their top 5 strengths to make those successes happen. When I asked if they could have used their top 5 strengths to improve a challenging situation, students were able to connect their top 5 strengths to ways they could overcome challenges.

Implications for Practice

There is much research that shows that underrepresented students do not succeed at the same rates in colleges as their more advantaged peers (Dennis et al., 2005; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). Using a strengths-based approach and having students take the StrengthsQuest assessment gives students a language that reflects who they are and what they do well. When students leverage their strengths to do well in areas that challenge them, they often demonstrate self-efficacy:

They believe they can accomplish the goals they set and they take action to make those goals a reality. The importance of academic self-efficacy for a population of students who find higher education to be challenge (for any number of reasons) cannot be understated. If we want to see underrepresented students succeeding in college at greater rates, taking the StrengthsQuest assessment and applying a strengths-based approach to the challenges these students face is one way help them succeed in college.

I think it is important for administrators and student services professionals to know that the students I interviewed initially were not very interested or excited about taking the StrengthsQuest assessment. They used phrases like, “This is dumb” and “What’s the point?” to communicate what they thought about taking it. However, after taking the assessment, these same students said things about how surprised they were that their top 5 did reflect who they are and how important it has been to them to recognize and use their strengths.

Importantly, there were 5 students who had some sort of formal manner in which they delved deeper into their strengths. They did this through interviewing to be a Welcome Week leader, as a Community Advisor in the residence halls, or writing an essay for class. Students need to have these deeper kinds of conversations around their strengths. While it can be helpful for them to take the assessment and to get a report, if we really want to see how this assessment can make a difference in students’ lives and in their graduation and retention rates on campus we have got to get them to examine and critically think about them. Compared to the entire sample, these 5 students were farther

along the path of connecting their strengths to the challenges and successes they face and to leveraging their strengths to overcome obstacles.

There are some programs on campus like Orientation and First Year Programs and Housing and Residential Life that are doing a great job with their student workers in talking about strengths. The rest of our students are left to bump into someone who understands the importance of a strengths-based approach and are genuinely interested in their success on campus. One of the reasons Ellie is still on campus is because a professor sat down with her and had a personal conversation about her strengths and how she could use them to succeed on campus. Obtaining a college degree is too important to leave such matters to chance. We need to do more and integrate the StrengthsQuest assessment and the results into our campus culture and programming broadly.

Offices on campus like the Center for Teaching and Learning could share tips with faculty on how to integrate strengths into the classroom. Or they could host workshops for faculty to attend. Professors can integrate an assignment into their class that asks students to critically examine their assessment results. Many of our classes have a service learning component and students are asked to reflect on their experiences. Tying in a student's top 5 strengths would be a way to connect what students do well to their classroom experiences. Students are often asked to do group work in class. It would be easy to have students reflect on their top 5 strengths and have a short group discussion before starting the assigned group project. The students have now had an intentional discussion about what each student can contribute to the group that will

outlive that one project in that one class. If a student is struggling in a class, finding a way to engage that student's strengths to overcome the obstacle before them will move the student towards self-efficacy. If professors do not feel they have the background to facilitate a conversation with students around using their strengths to succeed in campus, they can and should team up with Student Services and Student Affairs professionals who do have that background.

Staff members who supervise student workers can use a strengths-based approach to talk with students about the work they do. Advisors can use the language of strengths to help students overcome academic and personal obstacles. Advisors can also connect the wide range of campus experiences students have to their strengths. They can ask students about their campus jobs, volunteer experiences and classes and how they connect those experiences to their top 5 strengths. When they have these conversations, advisors or staff members need to urge reluctant or busy students to dig deeper and make the connections between that student's campus experiences and their top 5. Anecdotally, a number of students in my sample did have an advisor ask about their strengths. However, the conversations were short lived when the students didn't make the connections and the advisor didn't follow up. As I have demonstrated, you do not have to know students well to get them to make these connections. However, in having these conversations I do think it is important that you care whether the student in front of you succeeds or fails.

Finally, a number of students personally thanked me for taking a positive approach to looking at underrepresented student populations. These students had heard again and again from many quarters their slim chances of succeeding. They had heard the statistics that told them how unlikely it is that they would succeed and graduate. It mattered to them that I discarded the medical model of deficiency and instead focused on how they could succeed. From my work in my master's program it does seem that higher education is slowly moving in a similar direction from the medical model to a strengths-based approach. For those of us working in Student Services or Academic Affairs we should not rest on our laurels as that happen, but personally take responsibility to use a strengths-based approach when working with students, especially underrepresented students who may need additional support to succeed in higher education.

Implications for Research

It would be very useful for someone to do a longitudinal study that examines degree of influence the StrengthsQuest assessment has on the self-efficacy of underrepresented students. I was looking for evidence of self-efficacy when students answered my questions, but it would be really helpful to be able to parse out how significant taking the StrengthsQuest assessment is. I did hear students very clearly connect their successes with their top 5 strengths. It would be useful for scholars and practitioners to know just how important it is to students to take the assessment, learn their top 5, and apply them to their academic career at the university.

Our campuses are going to continue to become more diverse. Access to higher education has never been greater. Unfortunately, success in higher education is still out of reach for many students who are underrepresented in some way. If the StrengthsQuest assessment does in fact increase a student's self-efficacy, we owe it to them to do all we can to provide the assessment and opportunities to reflect on and to apply their strengths during their four years on campus.

Implications for Policy

Connections between students and their top 5 strengths are happening on campus in pockets here and there. We need top level administrators to provide the support and research that using a strengths-based approach matters and that it works to help students integrate on campus, and to ultimately graduate. Without having seen the messaging that Student Affairs sends to students when they take the assessment, I suggest an approach that markets the assessment to the students as more than an initiative from the university. For example, this marketing should share with them specific benefits that come from knowing your strengths and using them on campus. These would be benefits that the student would derive directly from taking the assessment and using their top 5 strengths (i.e. well-being, grades, four year graduation rates). Many students I spoke to had negative perceptions prior to taking the assessment saying things like, "this is dumb." My sample population is quite small, but after taking the assessment, students were positive about it. There are many benefits to students if they take the assessment, learn their top five and use them. If we can get students to make meaningful connections as to

how taking this assessment will help them, it is likely they will be more open to opportunities to follow-up and apply what they have learned.

Additionally, I second Kenneth Oldfield's suggestion for having a First-Generation Office on campus to be another way to help support underrepresented students (Oldfield, 2007). Mr. Oldfield is a retired faculty member and first-generation student himself. He has written a couple of articles about how hard it was (and is) for first-generation students when they arrive on steps of higher education. There is often a great amount of overlap between first-generation, low-income and underrepresented minority student populations. If we think about the reasons that first-generation students do not fare as well in college as their second-generation peers, all of them can be surmounted with additional support. Getting through the admissions process successfully and getting a financial aid package are the very first steps on the long road to graduate from college for these students. We need to do more than let these students in the door and give them money to fund their education.

Conclusion

Current research show that for a variety of reasons, underrepresented students face additional challenges in higher education (Dannells, 1993, p. 80; Dumais & Ward, 2010, p. 250; Ovink & Veazey, 2011, p. 374; Pascarella et al., 2004; Pike & Kuh, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996). Current research also shows that success of using strengths-based approach in many contexts, including higher education (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Buckingham, 2010; Lopez et al., 2006; Schreiner, 2010; Smith, 2006; Wood et al., 2011).

What is missing is a connection between a strengths-based approach and underrepresented students in higher education. While the scope of my research did not allow for a longitudinal study that could determine if the StrengthsQuest assessment did increase the self-efficacy of underrepresented students, I did find that students were able to provide evidence of self-efficacy when talking about their academic, personal and career spheres and experiences in those spheres on campus.

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Appendices:

Appendix A: Clifton StrengthsFinder® Quick Reference Card

Achiever People especially talented in the Achiever theme have a great deal of stamina and work hard. They take great satisfaction from being busy and productive.

Activator People especially talented in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. Once a decision is made, they want to act quickly.

Adaptability People especially talented in the Adaptability theme prefer to “go with the flow.” They tend to be “now” people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.

Analytical People especially talented in the Analytical theme search for reasons and causes. They have the ability to think about all the factors that might affect a situation.

Arranger People especially talented in the Arranger theme can organize, but they also have a flexibility that complements this ability. They like to figure out how all of the pieces and resources can be arranged for maximum productivity.

Belief People especially talented in the Belief theme have certain core values that are unchanging. Out of these values emerges a defined purpose for their life.

Command People especially talented in the Command theme have presence. They can take control of a situation and make decisions.

Communication People especially talented in the Communication theme generally find it easy to put their thoughts into words. They are good conversationalists and presenters.

Competition People especially talented in the Competition theme measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests.

Connectedness People especially talented in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason.

Consistency People especially talented in the Consistency theme are keenly aware of the need to treat people the same. They try to treat everyone in the world with consistency by setting up clear expectations and adhering to them.

Context People especially talented in the Context theme enjoy thinking about the past. They understand the present by researching its history.

Deliberative People especially talented in the Deliberative theme are best described by the serious care they take in making decisions or choices. They anticipate the obstacles.

Developer People especially talented in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from these improvements.

Discipline People especially talented in the Discipline theme enjoy routine and structure. Their world is best described by the order they create.

Empathy People especially talented in the Empathy theme can sense the feelings of other people by imagining themselves in others’ lives or others’ situations.

Focus People especially talented in the Focus theme can take a direction, follow through, and make the corrections necessary to stay on track. They prioritize, then act.

Futuristic People especially talented in the Futuristic theme are inspired by the future and what could be. They inspire others with their visions of the future.

Harmony People especially talented in the Harmony theme look for consensus. They don't enjoy conflict; rather, they seek areas of agreement.

Ideation People especially talented in the Ideation theme are fascinated by ideas. They are able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena.

Includer People especially talented in the Includer theme are accepting of others. They show awareness of those who feel left out, and make an effort to include them.

Individualization People especially talented in the Individualization theme are intrigued with the unique qualities of each person. They have a gift for figuring out how people who are different can work together productively.

Input People especially talented in the Input theme have a need to collect and archive. They may collect information, ideas, history, or even relationships.

Intellection People especially talented in the Intellection theme are characterized by their intellectual activity. They are introspective and appreciate intellectual discussions.

Learner People especially talented in the Learner theme have a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve. In particular, the process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.

Maximizer People especially talented in the Maximizer theme focus on strengths as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something strong into something superb.

Positivity People especially talented in the Positivity theme have an enthusiasm that is contagious. They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do.

Relator People especially talented in the Relator theme enjoy close relationships with others. They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.

Responsibility People especially talented in the Responsibility theme take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty.

Restorative People especially talented in the Restorative theme are adept at dealing with problems. They are good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it.

Self-Assurance People especially talented in the Self-Assurance theme feel confident in their ability to manage their own lives. They possess an inner compass that gives them confidence that their decisions are right.

Significance People especially talented in the Significance theme want to make a big impact. They are independent and sort projects based on the level of influence it will have on their organization and others around them.

Strategic People especially talented in the Strategic theme create alternative ways to proceed. Faced with any given scenario, they can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues.

Woo People especially talented in the Woo theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a connection with another person.

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Appendix B – Consent Form

CONSENT FORM University of Minnesota – Twin Cities campus

Qualitative Study on Whether Taking the StrengthsQuest Assessment Increases the Self-Efficacy of Underrepresented Students at the University of Minnesota?

You are invited to participate in a research study on whether taking the StrengthsQuest assessment increases the self-efficacy of underrepresented students at the University of Minnesota. Underrepresented students include low-income, first-generation and/or minority students. This research study will include a one-hour interview with first-year and sophomore CEHD TRiO students at the University of Minnesota – Twin Cities campus. You were selected for this study because you are an underrepresented student, you have taken the StrengthsQuest assessment and you know what your top 5 Strengths are. Please read this form and ask me any questions you may have before you agree to participate in this study.

This qualitative research study is being conducted by a graduate student, Lara Christley, from the University of Minnesota in the department of Postsecondary Teaching and Learning. This research will be used for a thesis paper tentatively entitled “Does Taking the StrengthsQuest Assessment Increase the Self-Efficacy of Underrepresented Students at the University of Minnesota?”

Background Information

The purpose of this study is to explore through interviews and research whether taking the StrengthsQuest assessment can increase the self-efficacy of underrepresented students. Self-efficacy is the belief that one can accomplish what one desires. I am particularly interested to know if you can connect your Strengths to your career and academic environments. I will interview at most 20 students, approximately half male and half female, for this study.

Procedures

If you agree to this study, I will ask the following:

- Through email I will set up an interview time, date and place that is mutually agreeable to both of us.
- Through email you will receive a consent form. Please read the consent form before the interview.
- At the interview you will fill out an intake form. You will also read, and if comfortable proceeding with the interview, you will sign the consent form.

- I will audiotape this interview. It will then be transcribed. There are two choices below depending on whether you would like a copy of the transcribed interview or not. Please check the appropriate box below that reflects your wishes.
 - Yes, I agree to be audio taped, but I **do not** wish to have a copy of the transcript.
 - Yes, I agree to be audio taped, and I **do** wish to have a copy of the transcript. My email address is _____ . Please use this email to send me a copy of my transcribed interview.
- The interview will last up to one hour.
- Upon completion of the interview you will be given \$20 to show my appreciation for the time spent on this study.

Risks and Benefits of Being in This Study

There are no direct benefits for participating in this study.

There is the risk that a participant may be identifiable based on the information shared in the interview with me. This may be true even with the use of a pseudonym. A pseudonym is a name used in place of your own name. All participants will be given pseudonyms.

Compensation

Participants will be given \$20 for the hour they spend with me answering questions.

Confidentiality

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely and only myself will have access to the records. Study data will be encrypted according to current University policy for protection of confidentiality.

I will conduct the interviews. Each interview will be coded and a pseudonym given to each student. Once all interviews are complete the coded list of interview names will be deleted. The interviews will be transcribed within one month of the initial interview by someone other than me. Once each interview is transcribed, the original digital interview file will be deleted. All data files will be kept securely on my password protected University of Minnesota Netfiles account. Only myself as the Principal Investigator will have access to the data files. I will keep the interviews for five years and will then delete them. You have the right to a copy of the transcribed interview.

Voluntary Nature of the Study

If you have any questions about this study or the research I am doing, please feel free to contact me at larac@umn.edu. Please know that your participation is voluntary. You may

refuse to participate and there will be no penalty for not participating. You, the subject, may discontinue participation at any time without penalty.

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher(s), **you are encouraged** to contact the Research Subjects' Advocate Line, D528 Mayo, 420 Delaware St. Southeast, Minneapolis, Minnesota 55455; (612) 625-1650.

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: _____

Date:

Contact information:

Lara Christley, Principle Investigator
larac@umn.edu

Mike Stebleton, Advisor
612-625-2110
steb004@umn.edu

Cathrine Wambach, Advisor
612-625-2547
wamba001@umn.edu

Appendix C – Intake Form

INTAKE FORM
University of Minnesota – Twin Cities campus

Qualitative Study on Whether Taking the StrengthsQuest Assessment Increases the Self-Efficacy of Underrepresented Students at the University of Minnesota?

Date: _____ Interview Number: _____

Pseudonym: _____

_____ (Your full name, printed)

Year in school: Freshman Sophomore

Major: _____

Gender: _____

Please check the following boxes as they apply to you.

First-generation? (Are you the your first in your immediate family (other than your siblings) to obtain a bachelor's degree? This means your parents do not have a bachelor's degree.)

Low-income? (Are you eligible for federal Pell grants? In your financial aid package do you receive Pell grants?)

Are you an underrepresented minority? (Check all that apply. Please fill in what specific cultural/ethnic group you identify with. For example, if you chose Asian you might write in Cambodian.)

African: _____

American Indian or Alaskan Native: _____

Asian: _____

- Black or African American: _____
- Hispanic: _____
- Multiple identities: _____
- White: _____
- Other _____

Appendix D - Thesis Questions

1. What are your top 5 Strengths?
2. Do you think any of your top 5 Strengths represent you? Please explain them in your own words. If you can, give an example of how that particular Strength fits you.
3. Have you talked with an advisor, student services personnel, career advisor or faculty member about your top 5 Strengths?
 - a. If yes, how did that conversation unfold?
 - b. How useful was that conversation?
4. Students at your level in college are being asked to make many choices about classes and majors. How have you used your top 5 Strengths to make these decisions?
5. Your parents, professors, advisors and friends have expectations of you. Give an example of how you have used a top 5 Strength to meet an expectation someone has had of you.
(If they cannot name a top 5 Strength, they can think of any strength/ability/talent they have)
6. Tell me about a time when someone gave you positive feedback on your performance.
 - a. Looking back, how much did you use your Strengths to achieve that positive outcome?
7. Name an academic goal you set for yourself.
(Examples might include better time management, studying more, reaching for a gpa, choosing a challenging major, visiting a professor's office hours. Have you set any academic goals for yourself?)
 - a. How much did your top 5 Strengths help you to achieve it? Or, how could your top 5 Strengths help you achieve it?
 - b. What did that achievement mean for you?
8. How have you been able to use your top 5 Strengths to succeed interpersonally?
(This might have included group work in class, working on a group project, volunteering time in a student organization, or talking to your advisors or mentors.)
9. Is there a class or a time that you struggled to feel successful?
 - a. Now that you know about Strengths, can you think of how you could have used your (fill in the Strength) to succeed in that situation?
10. What is a future goal you have set for yourself?
 - a. What challenges lay ahead for you?
 - b. What do you need to be successful in reaching that goal?
 - c. How confident are you that you will succeed?
11. Based on your top 5 Strengths, what kind of work environment is a good fit for you?