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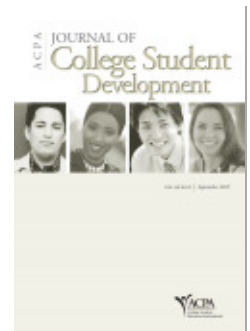
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## **Building a Strengths-Based Campus to Support Student Retention**

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# Building a Strengths-Based Campus to Support Student Retention

Krista M. Soria    Robin Stubblefield

Strengths-based approaches are flourishing across hundreds of higher education institutions as student affairs practitioners and educators seek to leverage students' natural talents so they can reach "previously unattained levels of personal excellence" (Lopez & Louis, 2009, p. 2). Grounded in a framework of positive psychology (Gilman, Huebner, & Furlong, 2009; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), these strengths-based initiatives help students to identify their natural talents, engage students in productive activities to develop their personal talents into strengths, and empower students to mobilize their strengths in everyday situations (Soria, Roberts, & Reinhard, 2015; Soria & Stubblefield, 2014). Strengths-based educational approaches are governed by the principle that capitalizing upon one's best qualities will lead to greater success as opposed to focusing on remedying one's weaknesses (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Lopez & Louis, 2009).

One of the most well-known tools to help college students discover their strengths is the Clifton StrengthsFinder® assessment, developed using interview data from more than two million individuals over three decades (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Hodges & Harter, 2005). The StrengthsFinder® assessment helps individuals to identify the 5 most salient talent themes out of 34 natural talent themes, which are naturally recurring patterns of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors which, when refined with knowledge and skill, can be developed

into strengths (Hodges & Harter, 2005). Several million college students have taken the StrengthsFinder® assessment to learn their top 5 talent themes (known colloquially as "top five strengths"; Lopez & Louis, 2009). Strengths-based approaches are focused upon helping individuals see their strengths as aspects of their identities that set them uniquely apart from others—even individuals with the exact same top 5 talent themes in the same order of salience (the odds of which are 1:34 million) are likely to use those themes in very unique ways.

Even amid the growth of strengths-based approaches on college campuses, little research exists that examines the benefits of strengths-based approaches for students. We attempt to bridge the gap in literature by examining the relationship between first-year undergraduate students' strengths awareness and their retention. The institution under examination offers one of the largest implementations of strengths-based approaches in the nation, making it an ideal location within which to study the benefits of strengths-based approaches for first-year students.

## BUILDING A FRAMEWORK FOR STRENGTHS

In Fall 2011, a large, public research-intensive university located in the Midwest of the United States offered the StrengthsFinder® assessment to all incoming first-year students. Students were invited to take the StrengthsFinder® via a personalized email that contained a code to take

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the assessment at no cost. Before they arrived on campus for matriculation, 5,122 first-year students, 95.4% of the first-year class, took the online assessment and received their top five talent themes (addressed informally as “top five strengths” across campus). Throughout their first semester, students engaged in a variety of activities related to their top five strengths, with an initial concentration of programming and interactions offered during an extended new student orientation. The university is a large, decentralized institution; therefore, while some strengths activities were coordinated through a central office, the majority of activities were initiated and developed by departments independently. Strengths-related programming varied across these unique contexts, although faculty and staff were provided with numerous resources and training opportunities to standardize the strengths-related messages students received.

The foundation for these efforts correspond to Lopez and Louis’s (2009) framework of the principles of strengths-based education, which broadly include: measuring students’ strengths; providing individualized educational experiences for students based on their personal strengths; developing networking opportunities for students to share, explore, and develop their strengths with others; drawing out students’ strengths through deliberate application of strengths inside and outside of classrooms; and encouraging students to undertake their own intentional development of strengths by actively seeking out novel experiences and previously unexplored venues for focused strengths development and application. The university adopted a strengths initiative framework that served as an outline for strengths integration strategies and established learning objectives for students at developmental milestones. The overarching goals of the strengths initiative are to increase students’ strengths awareness as a foundation for increased self-awareness, engage-

ment, confidence, and retention: the majority of learning outcomes focused on students’ strengths awareness. We first investigated whether students who took the StrengthsFinder® had higher retention rates than their peers. Next, we investigated whether first-year students’ strengths awareness and strengths-based discussions with others were associated with students’ retention to their second year.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

At the end of their first semester, all first-year students ( $N = 5,368$ ) were invited to participate in an online survey which assessed their strengths awareness and engagement with strengths initiatives. The student response rate for the survey was 27.8% ( $n = 1,493$ ). White and female students were slightly overrepresented in the sample compared with the population (which was 52.2% female and 75.4% White) and respondents were also slightly more likely than nonrespondents to be retained from their first year to their second year (94.1% compared to 89.9%).

### Measures

*Strengths Awareness and Strengths Experiences.* We used the Strengths Awareness Measure (Anderson, 2003), an instrument which asks students to rate their agreement with 10 items about their strengths (e.g., “I can name my top five strengths”; “I know how my strengths impact my relationships”). Students rated their agreement to these items on a scale of 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Schreiner (2004) previously found the items had good reliability ( $\alpha = .86$ ). In the survey, students were also asked to indicate whether they had discussions about their strengths with a variety of individuals and in different settings. We combined variables to reflect three broad areas: (a) strengths conversations with academic

TABLE 1.  
Means, Standard Deviations, and Coding for Variables

Variables Used in Analysis	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Coding/Scale
<b><i>Precollege Demographics and Characteristics</i></b>			
Female	.61	.49	
First-Generation	.26	.44	
Black	.03	.18	
Asian	.13	.34	
Native American	.01	.10	0 = no; 1 = yes
Hispanic	.03	.17	
International	.04	.19	
Veteran	.00	.07	
In-State Resident	.65	.48	
ACT Scores	28.00	3.66	16.00 to 36.00
<b><i>College Experiences</i></b>			
Lived in Residence Halls	.86	.34	
Enrolled in a Freshman Seminar	.28	.45	0 = no; 1 = yes
Participated in Access to Success	.08	.27	
Grade Point Average	3.30	.54	1.47 to 4.00
<b><i>Strengths Discussions</i></b>			
Academic Advising or Career Counseling	.44	.50	0 = no strengths conversations; 1 = at least one strengths conversation
Study Groups, Friends, or Student Organizations	.43	.49	
Classes or Professors	.51	.50	
<b><i>Academic Major Area</i></b>			
Education or Agriculture	.15	.36	
STEM or Health	.33	.47	0 = Arts/Humanities major; 1 = yes
Business	.09	.29	

advisors or career counselors; (b) strengths conversations in classes or with professors; and, (c) strengths conversations in study groups, in student organizations, or with friends (Table 1).

*Demographics and Personal Characteristics.* The Office of Institutional Research (OIR) provided data regarding students' sex, race/ethnicity, residency (in-state versus out-of-state), first-generation status, and veteran status, all of which were dummy-coded (Table 1).

*College Experiences.* OIR also provided

data regarding students' voluntary enrollment in first-year seminars, residence in on-campus residence halls, participation in retention-focused academic programs (i.e., Access to Success, a specialized advising community focused on promoting the retention of students), and academic major (Table 1).

*Academic Achievement and Retention.* OIR provided students' cumulative grade point average, retention to the second year, and ACT and SAT scores. When ACT scores were

missing, SAT scores were converted to ACT scores according to concordance tables.

### DATA ANALYSIS

To develop our independent measure, we conducted a factor analysis on the 10 strengths awareness items with oblique rotation (promax). The factor had a high reliability, with Cronbach's  $\alpha = .93$ . The factor score was computed using the regression method and standardized with a mean of 0 and a standard deviation of 1 (range  $-2.55$  to

1.91). We next used chi-square analyses examining differences in students' retention by whether they had taken the StrengthsFinder® and logistic regression examining students' retention to the second year.

### RESULTS

First, we discovered first-year students who took the StrengthsFinder® assessment had significantly higher retention rates compared to their peers who did not take the assessment: 91.5% ( $n = 4,653$ ) of first-year students who

TABLE 2.  
Logistic Regression Analysis Predicting First-Year Students' Retention

Predictor	B	SE	Wald's $\chi^2$	$e^{\beta}$
Strengths Awareness	0.310*	0.138	5.056	1.364
Discussions With Advisors or Career Counselors	1.448**	0.469	9.535	4.254
Discussions in Classes or With Professors	1.107*	0.440	6.342	3.025
Discussions in Study Groups, in Student Orgs, or With Friends	1.522***	0.346	19.409	4.583
Female	-0.576*	0.281	4.203	0.562
First-Generation	-0.684*	0.279	6.020	0.505
African American	0.303	0.844	0.129	1.354
Asian American	1.326*	0.612	4.694	3.765
Native American	0.307	1.139	0.073	1.359
Hispanic	-1.183*	0.571	4.294	0.306
International	0.904	1.163	0.604	2.468
Access to Success	-0.605	0.675	0.804	0.546
Veteran	-1.388	1.084	1.641	0.249
Freshman Seminar	0.326	0.298	1.198	1.386
In-State Resident	1.001***	0.282	12.596	2.720
Lived in Residence Hall	0.356	0.385	0.852	1.427
Grade Point Average	1.205***	0.193	38.818	3.336
ACT Scores	-0.031	0.049	0.389	0.970
Education or Agriculture Major	0.236	0.469	0.253	1.266
STEM or Health Major	0.591	0.346	2.915	1.806
Business Major	1.058	0.622	2.891	2.882
Constant	-1.841	1.410	1.705	0.159

**Note.** Pseudo- $R^2 = .127$  (Cox & Snell, 1989),  $.350$  (Nagelkerke, 1991).

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

took the StrengthsFinder® were retained compared to 80.8% ( $n = 227$ ) of students who did not take the StrengthsFinder®,  $\chi^2(1) = 36.976$ ,  $p < .001$ . Next, we used binary logistic regression to examine whether students' strengths awareness and strengths discussions were associated with students' retention to their second year controlling for demographic variables and college experiences. The logistic regression retention model properly classified 94.1% of the cases, and the Hosmer–Lemeshow (1989) goodness-of-fit test statistic was not significant, implying that the model's estimates acceptably fit the data. The results suggest first-year students' strengths awareness is positively associated with students' retention to their second year of study (Table 2)—the odds of retention increase by 1.364 for every 1-unit increase in strengths awareness (1 standard deviation from the mean). The odds of retention also increased for students who had strengths-related discussions with advisors or career counselors, in class or with professors, in study groups or student organizations, or with friends. The results suggest additional measures, including GPA and in-state residency, were more strongly associated with retention than strengths awareness. Overall, the strengths-based discussions students had with advisors, career counselors, and peers were associated with greater odds of retention than all of the other measures in the model.

## DISCUSSION AND LIMITATIONS

One significant finding is that taking the StrengthsFinder® assessment appears to be an early predictor of students' investment and persistence in the institution: students who were invited to take the StrengthsFinder but chose not to take the assessment were less likely to continue to their second year. The results also suggest first-year students' strengths awareness was positively associated with retention to the second year of enrollment. Furthermore,

students who had strengths discussions with a variety of campus professionals, with their peers, and in academic settings were significantly more likely to be retained to their second year over their peers who did not have these conversations. There are several components of the strengths initiative that may have worked to promote students' strengths awareness and subsequent retention at the university. We hypothesized students who worked on developing their talents into strengths were better prepared to tackle many of the challenges they faced in their first year of study (Stebleton, Soria, & Albecker, 2012), including making the transition to campus, enrolling in rigorous college courses, and making new friends. Academic advisors and career counselors are well-positioned to guide students through these transitions by helping them to envision future academic and career goals and leverage their strengths to overcome challenges (Schreiner, 2004, 2013). In our sample, 44% of students had conversations with advisors and counselors, who may have helped students to develop greater self-efficacy and become more engaged in their academic pursuits, thus increasing their retention (Soria & Stubblefield, 2014; Louis, 2011).

In addition, we believe that the institutional focus on students' strengths, as opposed to weaknesses, fostered a positive perception of the university and encouraged students to feel as though they uniquely and positively impacted the university community with their particular combination of strengths. The networking opportunities that students received around strengths—especially during their first weeks on campus—helped them to meet their peers by first getting to know them by their strengths (Lopez & Louis, 2009). This approach means that students got to know each other first and foremost by learning about the assets they brought with them to campus. Students connected with those who had similar



strengths, but also got to learn more about the diversity of strengths students had within their majors, classes, or colleges as well. The strengths-based connections students had with their peers were associated with the greatest odds of retention in the model, although it is difficult to disentangle the effects of belonging to a student organization or study group and having friends from the effects of the strengths conversations had by students in those contexts.

It is also likely the strengths-based conversations students had within classes or with their professors enhanced students' connectedness to the institution by increasing their self-efficacy, leaving them more confident in their abilities to persist (Soria & Stubblefield, 2014). Previous authors have also demonstrated that strengths-based activities held within classrooms can have positive effects on students' abilities to learn more effectively, accurately assess their abilities, and become more realistic about future expectations (Stebbleton et al., 2012). Given the large classes sizes commonly found in large public universities, we hypothesized students who had individual conversations with professors about their strengths may have also been more

motivated to persist over their peers who did not have these conversations due to more intensive faculty interactions and greater satisfaction with their experiences on campus (Schreiner, 2004).

There are several limitations of this study worth noting; for example, the data were drawn from a survey which was completed by less than one third of students who had slightly higher retention rates than their peers, which results in sample bias. Students who completed the survey may have been enthusiastic about their university experiences, which also meant being enthusiastic about the strengths initiative. Finally, the data were drawn from a specific institutional type, thus limiting generalizability. Overall, however, the results of this study suggest student affairs practitioners who employ strengths-based initiatives may positively enhance students' retention. We recommend future studies seek to examine additional benefits of students' strengths awareness on other vital student development and success outcomes.

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