

Assessment of Students' Strengths: The First Step to Student Success

Laurie Schreiner, Ph.D.
Eileen Hulme, Ph.D.

Department of Doctoral Higher Education
Azusa Pacific University
Azusa, California USA

Strengths-Based Education: A Paradigm Shift

- “Survival of the fittest”
- “Deficit remediation”
- “Strengths-based education”

The Dominant Paradigm

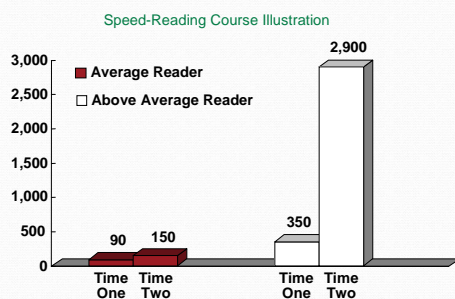
Students need to spend most of their time in their areas of weakness, in order to achieve.



The Problem?

Spending most of your time in your area of **weakness**—while it will improve your skills, perhaps to a level of “average”—will **not** produce excellence.

“greatness” comes from building on natural talents



Copyright © 2008 The Gallup Organization, Princeton, NJ. All rights reserved.

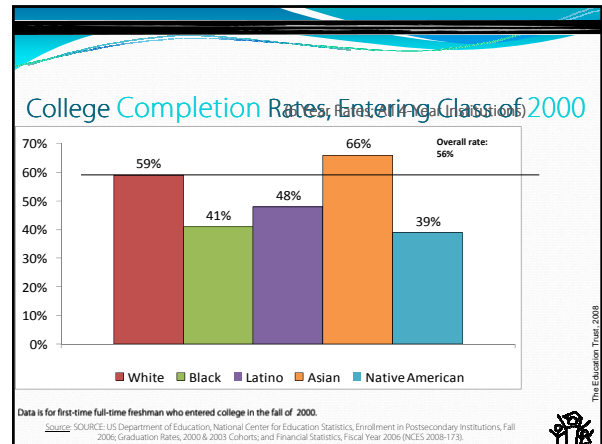
The Problem?

- Spending most of your time in your area of weakness—while it will improve your skills, perhaps to a level of “average”—will **NOT** produce excellence
- This approach does **NOT** tap into student motivation or lead to student engagement
- The biggest challenge facing us as educators: how to **engage the hearts and minds** of the learners

College Going by Family Income, 1973 – 2004

YEAR	Low Income	Mid Income	High Income
1973	20	41	64
1979	31	43	63
1984	34	48	74
1989	48	55	71
1994	43	58	78
1999	49	59	76
2004	50	63	79

Note: Income data were not available for 1974.
Source: U.S. Dept. of Education, Condition of Education, 2006. Table 29-1.



- ### The Heart of It All: Student Motivation
- Quality of effort → success
 - Motivation is the “fuel” for quality of effort
 - Generates and directs energy and effort
 - Student motivation is the best predictor of the persistence that leads to success
 - The best approaches to helping students persist and succeed focus on motivation

Strengths Philosophy

“Individuals gain more when they build on their talents, than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness.”

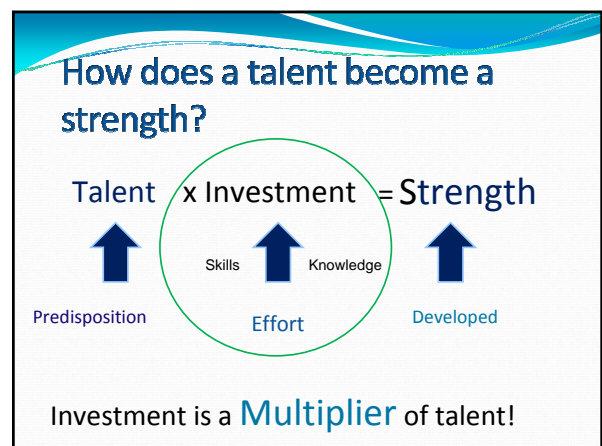
Clifton & Harter, 2003, p. 112

What are strengths?

Start with talent

“...naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied.”

Clifton & Harter, 2003



Talents

Ways of seeing the world

Ways of processing information

Ways of relating to people

Habits that enable success

Identifying Strengths

Inventories

- *Clifton StrengthsFinder™* (The Gallup Organization)
 - Text for First-Year Students: Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner. (2006) *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond*
- *Virtues in Action (VIA)* Peterson & Seligman
 - www.authentichappiness.org

Clifton StrengthsFinder

- Online instrument that identifies 5 signature themes of talent that can be developed into strengths
- 34 possible themes
- Strong construct validity and good reliability among university students
- Used with over 4 million people in 17 languages – and 300,000 US post-secondary students

Identifying Strengths

Advising Questions

- What did you learn with the greatest ease in school?
- What did your teachers compliment you about?
- What do your friends say they like best about you?
- What was your favorite assignment?
- What subjects do you enjoy studying the most?
- What fascinates you?

But what about weaknesses?

Weaknesses interfere with your own ability to perform to expected levels—or interfere with others' ability to do their work

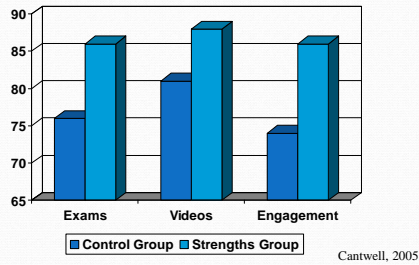
Recklessness Courage Fear

Overutilization Strength Underutilization
Shadow Low energy

What Outcomes Should This Produce?

- **Ultimate Outcome: Student Success**
 - Student learning/achievement
 - Persistence to graduation
 - Psychological well-being
- **Intermediate outcomes:**
 - Engagement
 - Self-efficacy/confidence
 - Perceived academic control
 - Hope (ability to formulate and reach goals)

Strengths-Based Learning

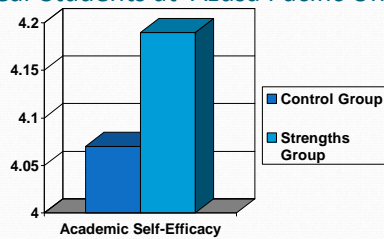


Academic Self-Efficacy

- Students' perception that they are capable of achieving academic success – they know how to take notes, pass exams, study, schedule their time, and write papers
- Significantly related to academic performance, persistence, and personal adjustment

Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001

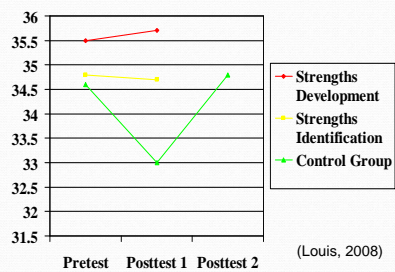
First-Year Students at Azusa Pacific University



Perceived Academic Control

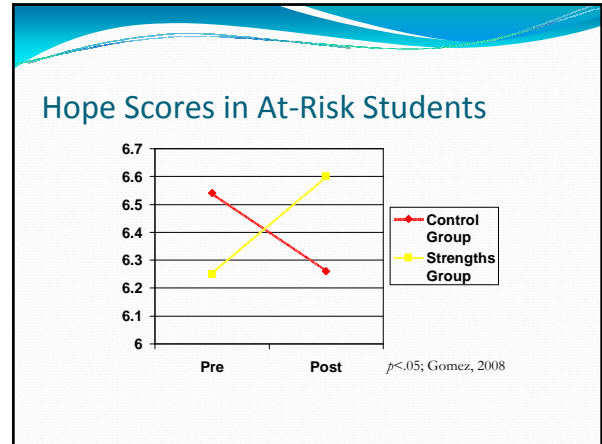
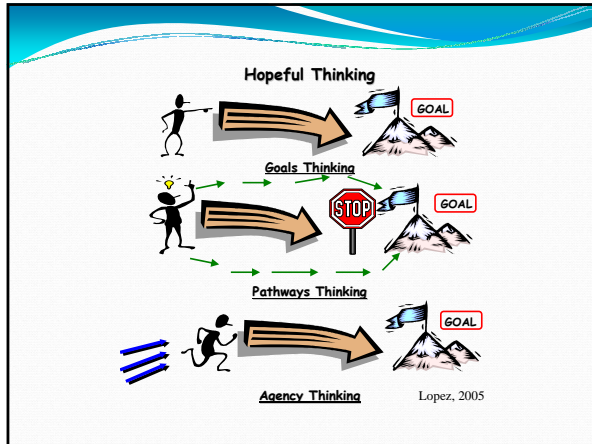
- Do I know what it takes to succeed here? Do I have what it takes?
- Predictive of quality and duration of effort, academic engagement, academic performance, and retention
- Particularly important during major transitions – and typically decreases during the first year of higher education
- Strengths development ought to provide answers to both questions – *do I have what it takes?* (identify and affirm talents) and *do I know what it takes?* (role of effort in identifying strategies and then investing time and energy to develop strengths)

Perceived Academic Control



Hope

- GPA = Goals + Pathways + Agency
- Students with high hope are more likely to graduate from university and to perform better academically



- ### Other Outcomes
- Course evaluations ($p < .001$)
 - Academic performance after one term and after one year ($p < .001$)
 - Retention after one year 77.6% vs. 65.9% ($p < .05$)
 - Positive self-concept ($p < .001$)
 - Perception of others improved ($p < .001$)

- ### Infusion of a Strengths Approach Throughout the First-Year Experience
- Academic applications: Learning styles, applying strengths to academic challenges
 - Career planning process
 - Goal setting
 - Identity and values
 - Relationships, team-building, and conflict resolution
 - Managing stress

For more information...

Laurie Schreiner, Ph.D. Eileen Hulme, Ph.D.
lschreiner@apu.edu ehulme@apu.edu

Noel Strengths Academy
Engaging Learners, Inspiring Leaders

www.apu.edu/strengthsacademy
 Azusa Pacific University
 Azusa, CA, USA 91702-7000
 (626)815-5745