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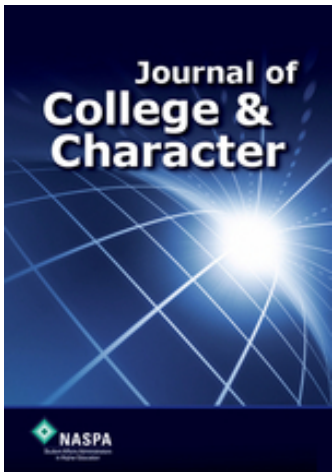

Journal of College and Character

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:
http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/ujcc20

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Published online: 01 Apr 2009.

To cite this article: Shane J Lopez & Michelle C Louis (2009) The Principles of Strengths-Based Education, Journal of College and Character, 10:4, , DOI: 10.2202/1940-1639.1041

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.2202/1940-1639.1041

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Journal of College & Character VOLUME X, NO. 4, April 2009

The Principles of Strengths-Based Education

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Abstract

Doing what we do best leads to high levels of engagement and productivity. Educators who capitalize on their strengths daily help students do what they do best by developing a strengths-based approach to education. The principles of strengths-based education include measurement, individualization, networking, deliberate application, and intentional development. Through a parallel process, educators practice the principles of strengths-based education when advising and teaching while students learn to put their strengths to work in learning and social situations.

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A strengths-based educational approach should not be confused with some of the atheoretical fads that have swept through higher education which are only loosely based upon educational or psychological research. In contrast, the underlying principles inherent to strengths-based education are derived from research in several fields, including education, psychology, social work, and organizational theory and behavior. Scholars within each of these disciplines have begun to share lines of inquiry and to develop novel, practical approaches aimed at promoting optimal functioning at both student and campus levels.

A strengths-based educational approach is best understood as a philosophical stance and daily practice that shapes how an individual engages the teaching and learning process. Strengths-based educational models represent a return to basic educational principles that emphasize the positive aspects of student effort and achievement, as well as human strengths. As early as 1830, Froebel designed the first kindergarten to elicit the active power or strengths of children. In the 20th century, Binet's (Binet & Simon, 1916) work was dedicated to enhancing the skills of students and to addressing deficits, not solely remediating problems. Hurlock's (1925) seminal work highlighted the finding that praise of students' work has a more powerful effect on performance than criticism of students' efforts. Terman's (Terman & Oden, 1947) life was dedicated to studying the "best of the best" in school to identify characteristics of success, and Chickering's (1969; Chickering & Reisser, 1993) college student development theory calls for attention to the development of students' broad-based talent. In addition, numerous educational philosophers (e.g., Dewey, Franklin, Spencer) have reinforced educators' commitment to

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enhancing the best qualities of students. For example, Dewey (1938) believed that "the purpose of education is to allow each individual to come into full possession of his or her personal power" (p. 10), a notion that is in alignment with a strengths-based educational approach.

Strengths-based education, though grounded in historical tenets and practices, is also built on five modern-day educational principles: (a) the *measurement* of strengths, achievement (Carey, 2004; U.S. DOE, 2004), and determinants of positive outcomes (Lopez, 2004; Rettew & Lopez, 2009), (b) *individualization*, which requires a tailoring of the teacher's/advisor's methods to student needs and interests (Gallup, 2003; Levitz & Noel, 2000), (c) *networking* with friends, family, and professionals who affirm strengths (Bowers, 2009), (d) *deliberate application* of strengths in and out of the classroom (Rath, 2007; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005), and (e) *intentional development* of strengths through novel experience or focused practice across a period such as a semester, academic year, or an internship (Louis, 2008).

The purpose of this article is to describe the components of strengths-based education as they are conducted on campuses today and to communicate an aspirational goal for future practices that could be increasingly effective at promoting positive student outcomes. A definition and description of strengths-based education provide an introductory context for this discussion.

The Definition and Practice of Strengths-Based Education

A strengths perspective assumes that every individual has resources that can be mobilized toward success in many areas of life (Anderson, 2000; Saleebey, 2001) and is characterized by "efforts to label what is right" within people and organizations (Buckingham, 2007, p. 6). The strengths philosophy explores ways to empower individuals to flourish rather than simply survive (Liesveld & Miller, 2005) and presupposes that capitalizing on one's best qualities is likely to lead to greater success than would be possible by making a comparable investment of effort into overcoming personal weaknesses or deficiencies (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Clifton & Nelson, 1992). Strengths-based education therefore is built upon these assumptions.

Strengths-based education begins with educators discovering what they do best and developing and applying their strengths as they help students identify and apply their strengths in the learning process so that they can reach previously unattained levels of personal excellence. Anderson (2004) expanded on this thinking about strengths-based education with the following:

> The process of strengths-based education involves educators intentionally and systematically discovering their own talents and developing and applying strengths as they work to remain current in their fields, to improve their teaching methods, to design and implement their curriculum, and to establish programmatic activities to help students discover their talents and develop and apply strengths while learning substantive knowledge, acquiring academic skills, developing thinking and problem-solving skills, and demonstrating their learnings in educational settings to levels of excellence (p. 1).

Strengths-based models embody a student-centered form of education with the primary goal of transforming students into confident, efficacious, lifelong learners whose work is infused with a sense of purpose (Anderson, 2000). As noted previously, a foundational assumption of strengths-based education is that potential exists in all students and that educators do well to discover and implement the kinds of learning experiences that can help their students realize this potential.

Strengths-based education has been established on hundreds of campuses in the U.S. and Canada. The initial step in a strengths-based approach involves the measurement of strengths and important educational indicators, such as hope, engagement, well-being, and other predictors of

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attendance, achievement, credits earned, and retention. Although there are several measures that may be used to identify positive individual qualities, the most widely used assessment on campuses today is the Clifton StrengthsFinder, an instrument developed by Gallup (1999) and typically administered through *StrengthsQuest* (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006), a resource that combines the assessment with additional information and learning activities designed for undergraduate populations. The Clifton StrengthsFinder is an internet-based measure consisting of 178 paired comparison items and requires about 35 minutes for completion. Available in more than 20 languages, the instrument has been taken by over 500,000 students and 4 million people worldwide (Mark Pogue, personal communication, March 16, 2009). The Clifton StrengthsFinder assesses 34 possible talent themes and provides respondents personal feedback on their five most dominant clusters of talent (referred to as *signature themes)*, followed by descriptive statements about the themes and numerous recommended strategies or action items for capitalizing on each.

The administration of the Clifton StrengthsFinder is a common first step for most postsecondary institutions seeking to utilize a strengths-based educational model, and a rich diversity of curricula and programmatic efforts on today's campuses support this instrument.To allow for a more rigorous examination of the effects of strengths-based approaches on engagement, achievement, well-being, retention, and job readiness, it may be useful to bring greater uniformity to strengths-based educational efforts in the future and to build such initiatives according to the five basic principles described subsequently.

The Five Principles of Strengths-Based Education

Principle 1: *Measurement* of student (and educator) characteristics includes strengths assessment, which supplements the typical focus on academic achievement and behavioral data (e.g., absences, living situation, off-campus responsibilities, etc.).

Educators rely on good data. Achievement tests (Carey, 2004; U.S. DOE, 2004) and behavioral reports often shape perceptions of good students and effective schools more than any other type of assessment. Now, strengths and other positive personal variables (e.g., hope, engagement, and well-being) can be measured with confidence. By augmenting the existing data with data from measures of human strengths and other positive variables, educators can develop a more detailed and complex picture of academic success, its determinants, and its long-term benefits (Lopez, 2004).

Educators measure what they value, and they work to enhance what they measure. Those within educational institutions have long valued achievement and its associated behaviors, yet boosting achievement, attendance, and retention has been a challenge. Potentially, student strengths and other indicators such as hope, engagement, and well-being might explain unaccounted variance in academic success. This hypothesis can only be examined when "positive" data are merged with existing data from large groups of American students.

For students and educators, measurement of strengths also has some short-term benefits. Upon completion of the Clifton StrengthsFinder, individuals receive five positive words for describing themselves. Students can carry these descriptors with them throughout their college career and into their first job and share them with their family and friends. Educators can do more of what they do best throughout their career by being mindful of their strengths.

Principle 2: Educators personalize the learning experience by practicing *individualization* whereby they think about and act upon the strengths of each student.

A strengths-based approach to working with students can be highly individualized, including efforts to personalize the learning experience (Gallup, 2003) by encouraging students to set goals based on their strengths and helping them to apply their strengths in novel ways

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(Cantwell, 2005) as part of a developmental process (Louis, 2008). Specifically, *individualization* involves educational professionals spontaneously thinking about and acting upon the strengths, interests, and needs of each student and systematically making efforts to personalize the learning experience (Gallup, 2003; Levitz & Noel, 2000). Through individualization efforts, educators (a) *highlight unique student qualities and goals* that make academic and social pursuits more successful and (b) *provide feedback* on the use of these qualities and on their role in the successful pursuit of meaningful goals. For individualization to be effective, the educator needs to begin helping the student to talk about goals within the context of personal strengths. Educator and student need to know "where they are" and "where they are going" and how strengths can help provide a pathway between these two. An understanding of personal goals (goals crafted by the student) and assigned goals (encouraged by the educator or institution) defines the aims and objects being pursued and creates many opportunities for feedback on goal pursuit. These mutual goals direct attention and effort, serve an energizing function, contribute to persistence, and spark action indirectly by leading to interests, discoveries, and use of knowledge, strategies, and skills (Locke & Latham, 2002).

Another practical approach to individualization involves the educator providing several options for how student learning can be demonstrated and assessed, allowing students to select the project or assessment type that most closely resonates with their own particular constellation of strengths. Potent and timely feedback addresses the development of life strategies grounded in knowledge of strengths and comments on goal pursuits. Formative feedback that puts progress into perspective should be augmented with summative feedback that emphasizes the strengths and strategies used for recent goal attainment.

Principle 3: *Networking* with personal supporters of strengths development affirms the best in people and provides praise and recognition for strengths-based successes.

"Strengths develop best in response to other human beings" (Clifton & Nelson, 1992, p. 124). Clifton believed that relationships help define who we are and who we can become, positioning strengths as the qualities that establish connections between people whereas weaknesses create division in relationships (Clifton & Nelson). As relational connections grow with the help of social networking, strengths-based education and development could blossom within new relationships and long-term, high quality relationships.

When educators are mindful of students' strengths, they can help students to become empowered while strengthening the mentoring relationship. As students discover their own strengths, they can share that new information and also work to think of other people in terms of their strengths. For example, when providing feedback to a fellow student, a person could begin by highlighting what was done well and why (i.e., which strengths were showcased) rather than what was done poorly and why (i.e., which weaknesses undermined performance).

In the context of close relationships, the strengths of others may be leveraged to manage personal weaknesses. By building strengths collaboratives, two individuals (or a larger group of people) can bring their best talents to projects while filling the gaps by sharing personal resources. In effective strengths-based models, educators use strengths to help others achieve excellence and to move beyond an individual focus to a more relational perspective.

Bowers (2009) heard the declaration "I have many supports in my life" repeatedly when interviewing college students who were nominated as the best at making the most of their strengths. One interpretation of this discovery is that high levels of social support are associated with the ability to become adept at using personal strengths. Alternatively, strengths-based education may reveal that networking around strengths produces increased social support.

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Principle 4: *Deliberate application* of strengths within and outside of the classroom fosters development and integration of new behaviors associated with positive outcomes.

A focus on the deliberate application of strengths within the classroom shapes the behaviors of educators and students and the nature of education in several notable ways. Specifically, educators utilizing a strengths-based stance begin by selecting pedagogical approaches that bring out their best in the educational process and seek to model how they leverage personal strengths in teaching, advising, or other domains of life. Such educators regularly discuss strengths application with students, providing personal examples or illustrations and describing some of the experiences that were critical in their own process of developing strengths.

Building upon the idea that "to educate" literally means "to draw out" or "to bring forth," strengths-based educators believe that part of their core responsibility is to draw out the strengths that exist within students by heightening students' awareness of them and cultivating a greater future orientation around how students' strengths might be catalyzed as they approach their education. Teaching from a strengths-based perspective requires educators to devote effort to helping students notice and identify occasions when their strengths are evident in the classroom or when they are using personal strengths to complete assignments with a high level of quality. A strengths-based educator also fosters a learning environment in which affirming peer-to-peer feedback is a regular feature, as students are taught to cultivate the skill of noting their classmates' strengths in action. Creating opportunities for students to choose assignment types that allow them to leverage their unique strengths provides practice in selecting activities that will bring out their best.

These recommendations are resonant with the core ideas of self-determination theory, which explains that individuals function at optimal levels and are most authentically motivated when three psychological needs are met: competence, autonomy, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Helping students understand the connection between their strengths and their personal goals and offering guidance in the application of their strengths in the most effective ways can elicit feelings of competence, and providing students with choices and opportunities for self-direction can support their need for autonomy. When educators establish a learning culture where students view themselves and others through "strengths-colored glasses" (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006, p.73), they help to foster appreciation for differences, highlight the value of collaboration and teamwork, and establish a powerful sense of relatedness.

Principle 5: *Intentional development* of strengths requires that educators and students actively seek out novel experiences and previously unexplored venues for focused practice of their strengths through strategic course selection, use of campus resources, involvement in extracurricular activities, internships, mentoring relationships, or other targeted growth opportunities.

Highly effective strengths educators understand that the ultimate objective of a strengths-based initiative is to help students consider their own responsibility in deliberately, attentively developing their strengths through practice and engagement in novel experiences. This final principle builds upon the others by suggesting that if students are to maximize their strengths, they will need to cultivate the discipline of proactively seeking new experiences that will expose them to information, resources, or opportunities to heighten their skills and knowledge about how to mobilize their strengths most effectively. This undertaking requires more than an innovative application of strengths in existing settings, but demands engagement in new experiences designed to expand personal strengths.

An ideal strengths-based educational model highlights the investment of effort and the creation of a strengths growth plan as critical components in a developmental process, and invites

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students to consider how they might formulate new strategies or access previously unutilized resources to aid them in the process of developing their strengths. The importance of including messages within strengths-based approaches related to seeking new experiences and applying effort is most apparent when considered within the context of research which suggests that students' implicit self-theories, or beliefs about the degree to which their personal abilities are malleable, exert profound effects on behavior within educational environments (Dweck & Molden, 2005). Students with a fixed mindset believe that personal attributes are constant, trait-like qualities that are not largely amenable to change efforts; students with a fixed mindset frequently believe that hard work reveals a lack of innate ability and therefore are more likely to eschew tasks that require prolonged effort (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007). In contrast, students with a growth mindset adhere to the belief that personal abilities are responsive to developmental efforts (Dweck, 1999); such students often view the exertion of effort as a prerequisite for developing their abilities and therefore as something to be embraced.

Brief interventions can influence mindset (Aronson, Fried, & Good, 2002; Kamins & Dweck, 1999). Counterintuitively, highlighting a student's positive traits or innate abilities actually can undermine future performance because affirming students' traits alone not only leads to a fixed mindset, but also to an ultimate decline in motivation if students are not also taught to be mindful of the importance of effort in producing positive outcomes (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). Educators must frame strengths-based approaches as a part of a developmental process that requires intentionality and effort, because merely to identify and affirm talent may inadvertently encourage students to adopt a fixed mindset and to embrace the unrealistic expectation that the mere presence of personal talents is sufficient to navigate the challenges they will encounter in the college setting (Louis, 2008).

Intentionality also requires that educators approach strengths-based education from a developmental perspective, conceptualizing strengths not as static traits but as dynamic qualities that can be developed over time. A shift away from brief strengths interventions occurring within a single class or programmatic area of an institution to coordinated cross-departmental initiatives would better account for students' developmental needs and goals at various stages of their collegiate experience.

The Principles in Action

These five principles need not be exercised in this particular order, yet the flow does represent what is typical on campuses today. Educators who know their own strengths catalyze the strengths development process for students, whereby the educator directs the student to complete strengths measures and provides individualized attention. Educators are responsible for their own networking, deliberate application, and intentional development, but results are best when colleagues support strengths development within the campus community at large. One or more educators are then equipped to guide students through networking, application, and development, applying concerted effort over time to integrate strengths-based practices.

With these principles of strengths-based education in mind, practices designed to identify and marshal the academic and psychological resources of each educator and student can be created, examined, and refined.

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