A Review of the Theory and Research Underlying the StrengthsQuest Program for Students

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Abstract

StrengthsQuest is a student program that focuses on strengths rather than weaknesses. It is intended to lead students to discover their natural talents and gain unique and valuable insights into how to develop such talents into strengths—strengths that equip them to succeed and to make important decisions that enable them to balance the demands of coursework, extracurricular activities, employment, and family. This article provides an overview of the StrengthsQuest program and the theory of strengths development upon which it is based. It explains the Clifton StrengthsFinder, which is the assessment at the foundation of StrengthsQuest, and provides documentation of its construct validity and reliability. The article concludes with a review of several studies indicating that strengths development has a positive impact on student productivity, life choices, self-confidence, goal-directed thinking, interpersonal relations, and academic success.

Overview of the StrengthsQuest Program for Students

StrengthsQuest is a student-development and -engagement program designed to help high school and college students achieve success in academics, career, and life. (See Appendix, "The Thumbnail StrengthsQuest.") StrengthsQuest is also intended to help instructors, academic advisers, career counselors, residence hall directors, and others who advise students incorporate strengths-based experiences in college preparation, freshman orientation, and student life programs, in the classroom, and in small-group and one-on-one feedback sessions.

The theory of strengths development has its own nomenclature. A talent is defined as a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, and

behavior that can be productively applied. A theme is defined as a group of similar talents. By refining dominant talent themes with knowledge and skill, individuals embark on the process of building strengths. A strength is defined as the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity.

Theory of Strengths Development

The StrengthsQuest program is based on the theory of strengths development. The roots of strengths-development theory can be traced back more than fifty years to the early work of Donald Clifton, the coauthor of the StrengthsQuest text (Clifton and Anderson 2002). Clifton's early research was conducted during his tenure as a professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska. His early research stream included the study of positive and negative attitudes (Clifton, Hollingsworth, and Hall 1952) and the study of teacher-student rapport and student-teacher characteristics (Dodge and Clifton 1956). Clifton, later awarded a commendation by the American Psychological Association as the "father of strengths-based psychology and grandfather of positive psychology" (McKay and Greengrass 2003, 87), based his life's work on his belief in the critical importance of identifying and developing the positive attributes of individuals. He based his research and practice on one simple question: "What would happen if we studied what is *right* with people?"

Content analysis of college student reflection papers suggested that strengths development involves three stages: identification of talents, integration of identified talents into one's self-view, and behavioral change (Clifton and Harter 2003). In the first stage, individuals increase self-awareness by discovering positive self-knowledge. Spontaneous reactions (noticing grammatical errors in the campus newspaper, naturally taking charge of a student group in a tense situation); yearnings (the desire to learn a new language, the aspiration to learn the name of every student in a large lecture hall); rapid learning (of a musical instrument or a computer program); and satisfaction (derived from delivering an important speech or organizing a major campus event) may all serve as indicators that one is drawing on areas of talent (Buckingham and Clifton 2001).

Strengths development begins with individuals recognizing and psychologically owning their talents. Next, individuals must recognize the value derived from performing activities congruent with their talents. They should make a conscious effort to seek out opportunities to exercise talents and share information about talents with family, friends, and fellow students or co-workers. To complete the strengths-building process, they should add relevant knowledge and skills to the talents.

The themes of talent that are the basis of the strengths-building process are identified and measured by an online assessment, the Clifton StrengthsFinder. (See Appendix.) The assessment is currently available in seventeen languages, with several more translations planned. More than 110,000 of the first one million respondents completed it in a language other than English. Respondents have come from nearly fifty different countries, twenty-five of which have had at least 1,000 respondents. More than 225,000 respondents report a country of residence other than the United States.

Development of the Clifton StrengthsFinder

The Clifton StrengthsFinder is grounded in more than three decades of studying success across a wide variety of functions in education and the workplace. Data from more than two million individuals were considered in developing the assessment. It is designed for participants with at least an eighth- to tenth-grade reading level (in most cases, people at least fourteen years of age). In pilot studies, teenagers had neither significant nor consistent problems completing the assessment.

Potential StrengthsFinder items were identified in part based on their power to predict desired positive outcomes. Items were initially derived from a qualitative review of item functioning and a content review of the representativeness of themes and items within themes, with an eye toward the construct validity of the entire assessment

(Lopez, Hodges, and Harter 2004). The items thus derived were organized into hundreds of criterion-related validity studies, including more than 100 predictive validity studies (Schmidt and Rader 1999).

Construct Validity

Many items were pilot tested during the development phase to assess their contributions to the measurement of themes and the consistency and stability of theme scores. Those with the strongest psychometric properties, including item-to-theme correlation, were retained, thereby balancing the amount of theme information and the length of the assessment. Items with construct validity should correlate to their proposed themes (constructs) at a higher level than to other themes (constructs). Consistent with that expectation, in a study of more than 600,000 respondents, the average item-to-proposed-theme correlation (corrected for part-whole overlap) was 6.6 times as large as the average item correlation to other themes (Lopez, Hodges, and Harter 2004).

Construct validity can also be assessed based on convergent and discriminant validity evidence. Harter and Hodges (2003) explored the relationship between the Clifton StrengthsFinder and the "five-factor model of personality" (McCrae and Costa 1987). As predicted, there was a statistically significant correlation between the Discipline theme and "conscientiousness" (r = .81), Woo ("winning others over") and "extroversion" (r = .83), Ideation and "intellectance" (r = .70), and Positivity and "agreeableness" (r = .58).

A recent item-to-theme correlation study that explored properties specific to culture and demographic variables found that the psychometric structure of Clifton StrengthsFinder scores was stable across countries, languages, age, and gender (Lopez, Hodges, and Harter 2004).

Internal Consistency and Reliability

The internal consistency of the Clifton StrengthsFinder, as measured by the coefficient alpha level, meets accepted standards (coefficient alpha = .70; AERA/APA/NCME 1999). In a recent study of 706 professional employees (Gallup 2000), twenty-three of the thirty-four themes of the Clifton StrengthsFinder had coefficient alpha levels greater than .70, and only three themes had coefficient alpha levels less than .65.

The Clifton StrengthsFinder also demonstrates test-retest reliability—the extent to which scores are stable over time. When the reliability of StrengthsFinder themes was evaluated, almost all of them exhibited test-retest reliability after a six-month interval of between r = .60 and r = .80—very respectable by current psychometric standards—and the average correlation of an individual's theme ranking across multiple time periods was r = .74 (Gallup 2000). A recent study of 106 college students

provided similar results, with an average correlation of theme ranking of r = .71 and two months between administrations (Schreiner, in press). (A maximum test-retest reliability score of r = 1.0 would indicate that all respondents received exactly the same score on two assessments.)

Ongoing research will explore how long the themes of talent measured by the StrengthsFinder endure. There is growing evidence (for example, Judge et al. 1999) that some aspects of personality are predictive throughout many decades of a person's life. Therefore, we expect that the stability of the themes will prove to be measured in years rather than months. Gallup's research team is pursuing an ongoing program of research to evaluate the construct validity, test-retest reliability, and other psychometric properties of the StrengthsFinder.

Impact of Strengths Development Programs

Strengths development has been linked to various positive outcomes in several studies. Follow-up surveys with 459 readers of *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham and Clifton 2001), conducted seventy-five days after completion of Clifton StrengthsFinder assessments, indicate a perceived value of strengths development (Harter and Hodges 2003). Even in a simplistic developmental context consisting of self-paced study from a book, the majority of respondents reported that they were making better choices in their lives, were more productive, and had increased self-confidence as a result of learning about and focusing on their strengths (Hodges and Clifton 2004).

Several studies have explored the relationships between participation in the StrengthsQuest program and increased levels of confidence. One of the first was conducted with a sample of 212 students at the University of California-Los Angeles (Crabtree 2002; Rath 2002). In that study, researchers collected pre-post surveys to measure the potential impact of the StrengthsQuest program on various desired outcomes. Each of the factors measured on the pre-post survey moved significantly in the hypothesized direction, suggesting improvement in constructs such as "aliveness," altruism, direction, and confidence. A pre-post survey completed by students contained several self-confidence and efficacy items ("I am confident in my ability to build friendships" and "I am an academically confident person") (Clifton 1997; Rath 2002). Student confidence was significantly higher at the end of the semester (post-test) than at the beginning (pre-test). In addition, qualitative surveys were collected to understand the results better, and statements from student reflection papers at the end of the semester tended to support the statistical findings. For example, one student reported, "I think learning my strengths gives me much more confidence and hope for myself. I am

able to be optimistic about what my future holds for me—that there's more to life than what I see right now in college" (Crabtree 2002).

An empirical study was conducted with undergraduate students in an organizational-behavior course at a large public university (Hodges and Clifton 2004). Students participated in various levels of strengths development consisting of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, online learning, and individualized developmental conversations with a Gallup consultant. Across levels of treatment, strengths-development programs yielded meaningful increases in state hope, a construct designed to measure an individual's current goal-directed thinking (Snyder et al. 1996).

A mixed-methods study of sixteen undergraduate teacher-education students applied the StrengthsQuest program in a mentoring context (McEntarffer et al., under review). The one-semester program involved weekly meetings between the mentor-mentee dyads, weekly meetings for the mentors as a group, and two interpersonal skill-building workshops. The quantitative results indicate that the mentors and mentees were able to focus on both their own strengths and the strengths of others. Overall results highlighted growth in relationships due in part to the heightened awareness of personal strengths.

Academic success has also been linked to strengths development. A recent study with English-composition students at a private university (Williamson 2002) involved a control group that completed the StrengthsFinder assessment but did not participate in further strengths-development programming. The treatment group completed the StrengthsFinder assessment and participated in two one-hour presentations on strengths theory, a presentation of the participants' individual StrengthsFinder results, and a one-on-one advising session with a trained strengths consultant. High school GPA and ACT scores, which are accepted as valid predictors of freshman-year academic performance, were the same for the two groups. Nonetheless, the treatment group—the one that participated in a strengths-development program—finished the first college semester with significantly higher GPAs than the control group. In another statistically significant finding, only two of the thirty-two students (6.25 percent) in the treatment group failed to meet minimum academic standards, compared to 20 percent of the control group (eight of forty students).

Concluding Comments

The StrengthsQuest program was released in 2002. Its roots lie in more than fifty years of theory and research. The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment of positive individual differences included within the StrengthsQuest program is also based on many years of research. Research on both the StrengthsQuest program and the StrengthsFinder

assessment is ongoing. Several empirical studies indicate that participation in the StrengthsQuest program can have an impact on desired outcomes such as confidence, hope, relational growth, and academic success. Future research should continue to explore the effectiveness of the StrengthsQuest program and should expand the number of outcome types studied. We encourage educators and researchers to assess the most salient outcomes for their students and design studies that can measure the impact of strengths-based development programs on those outcomes.

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Appendix
The Thumbnail StrengthsQuest

The StrengthsQuest program is intended to encourage students' awareness of their potential. It is also intended to help students approach all aspects of achievement from a strengths-based perspective. StrengthsQuest is designed to increase student involvement through a strengths-based campus philosophy. Finally, it enables students to create practical plans that use their greatest talents to build strengths. The StrengthsQuest program consists of three components designed to help students achieve those objectives:

First, students complete the Clifton StrengthsFinder, an online assessment that reveals a person's Signature Themes—the five greatest areas of talent.

Second, students are introduced to *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond* (Clifton and Anderson 2002). That workbook, available in printed form and online, helps students understand their talents, teaches them how to build strengths, and provides insights into how they can apply their talents and strengths in academics, careers, and life.

Finally, students are introduced to the StrengthsQuest Web site (www.strengthsquest.com), which facilitates student learning and development using interactive features, learning modules, customized action plans, and a discussion forum.

The Clifton StrengthsFinder

The Clifton StrengthsFinder presents the participant with 180 items. Each item lists a pair of self-descriptors, such as "I read instructions carefully" and "I like to jump right into things." The descriptors are placed as if anchoring ends of a continuum. The participant is asked to select the better self-descriptor from each pair and indicate the intensity of the answer, that is, the extent to which one descriptor is better than the other. The participant is given twenty seconds to respond to each item before the system moves on to the next item.

To indicate intensity, the respondent chooses among three response options for each self-descriptor. A value is assigned to each response category.

The Thirty-Four Clifton StrengthsFinder Themes

The items in the Clifton StrengthsFinder represent thirty-four different themes of talent. The intensity values of a participant's

responses to the items in each theme are averaged to derive a theme score, and the five themes with the highest scores are designated the participant's Signature Themes. As a rule, it is upon those five themes that strengths-building efforts are focused. The thirty-four Clifton StrengthsFinder themes are these:

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

Activator: People strong in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They are often impatient.

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

Belief: People strong in the Belief theme have certain core values that are unchanging. From those values emerges a defined purpose for their life.

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

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

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

Connectedness: People strong 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 who are strong 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 rules and adhering to them.

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

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

Developer: People strong in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from those improvements.

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

Empathy: People strong in the Empathy theme can sense the feelings of other people by imagining themselves in others' lives or others' situations.

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

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

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

Includer: People strong in the Includer theme are accepting of others. They show awareness of those who feel left out, and make efforts to include them.

Individualization: People strong 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 strong in the Input theme have a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information.

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

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

Maximizer: People strong 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 strong 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 who are strong in the Relator theme enjoy close relationships with others. They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.

Responsibility: People strong 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 strong 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 strong 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 strong in the Significance theme want to be very important in the eyes of others. They are independent and want to be recognized.

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

Woo: Woo stands for "winning others over." People strong 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.