

STRENGTHS-BASED ADVISING

By

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THE NATURE OF ACADEMIC ADVISING

Academic advising, at its heart, is a relationship between the advisor and the student. Far from giving advice, the most effective advisors are those who help students understand themselves, set attainable goals for college and beyond, and learn decision-making skills (Ender, 1997). Too often, however, new faculty advisors view the advising process as little more than course scheduling, and even advisors who have a broader view than this still tend to approach advising from a deficit model.

THE NATURE OF STRENGTHS-BASED ADVISING

We believe that strengths-based advising is one of the strongest ways of impacting students in their development of their strengths and in helping them learn ways of capitalizing on their strengths in order to succeed. So how is this approach different from the way advising is usually done?

First, both advisor and student are operating from a different *foundation* when a strengths-based approach is used. Rather than delineating the areas in which the student is likely to experience problems, or outlining “risk factors” that may make success difficult for the student, a strengths-based approach starts with an entirely different assumption: that by becoming more aware of their strengths, students will be motivated to set goals, achieve at a higher level, make better choices, and complete the tasks they set out to achieve.

Second, the *focus* of advising sessions shifts from problems to possibilities. Rather than focusing on what a student *cannot* do or emphasizing the lack

of skills or talents (such as pointing out poor math skills or lack of academic preparation in reading), the advisor emphasizes the talents, abilities, and strengths a student has that can be resources or assets as the student faces various challenges. Many of these strengths may be outside the academic arena, and the task then becomes being able to transfer that strength from outside the classroom to inside the classroom.

Third, the *framing* of advising tasks and questions shifts. Rather than problem-focused questions, the advisor asks open-ended questions that get the student talking about his or her strengths. Instead of asking, “Why are you always late to class?” or even, “What keeps you from getting to class on time?” the advisor may say, “Tell me how you make it to baseball practice early each day.”

Fourth, the *feeling* a student experiences in the advising session is different. Research conducted at Eastern University (Schreiner, 2000) found that students randomly assigned to a strengths-based advising approach as first-year students were significantly more satisfied with their advising experience than were those in the control group with advisors who used the traditional model.

Students who experience strengths-based advising report higher levels of satisfaction with advising because (a) they feel understood and known by their advisors at a much deeper level, (b) they experience the advising relationship as more positive because the focus is on areas where they excel and find fulfillment, and (c) they experience higher motivation levels since their choices arising from the advising sessions reflect and tap into their strengths.

Fifth, student *confidence* increases when strengths are the focus of attention. Because strengths are positive qualities that enable and empower students to do certain things very well, students become more confident to achieve in college and make the adjustments that college requires. As advisors explore a student's strengths, they are affirming who the student is and what he or she can do very well. This bolsters the identity of these students as it builds their confidence. This is substantially different than traditional advising, which usually focuses on the needs, problems, deficiencies, and areas of under-preparation—which in turn tends to decrease student confidence and increase self-doubt. However, when strengths are discussed within the context of how they can be developed and applied, students are affirmed and their confidence increases.

Sixth, students gain a sense of *direction* from discussing their strengths with advisors. Each strength points to things that students can do very well. Some strengths point to interpersonal competencies, while other strengths point to thinking, organizing, influencing, leading, managing, etc. As students become more and more aware of their strengths they become clear about how and where their strengths can be applied both in college and in careers. Perceiving how and where strengths can be applied gives students a sense of personal direction.

THE STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The strengths-based approach promotes student achievement by explicitly:

- Increasing student awareness of their strengths, talents, and abilities.
- Encouraging students to develop their strengths, talents, and abilities to the level of excellence.
- Reinforcing a student's motivation to achieve in college by helping them use the college experience to further develop their strengths, leading to the success they desire.
- Building students' confidence and efficacy by increased awareness of the strengths and abilities that have produced their successes.
- Facilitating students' use of their strengths as they learn and as they make needed adjustments.
- Helping students discover how they can apply their strengths, talents, and abilities to new areas of achievement and to areas where they had previously been less successful.
- Encouraging students to maximize their fullest potential by capitalizing on their strengths, talents, and abilities in career and life planning.

THE CHALLENGE OF USING THE STRENGTHS APPROACH WITH STUDENTS

- Students are usually unaware of their strengths, talents, abilities, and curiosities.
- Students may resist exploring their strengths for fear that they have few, if any, talents—or they may fear that if they used their talents and then failed, they wouldn't know where to turn and would become disillusioned and discouraged.
- Students may believe that overcoming weaknesses and removing deficiencies are the best methods for achieving.

- Students may have been taught to concentrate on weaknesses because this focus is not only the foundation of the U.S. education system, but is also the basis of many cultural norms.
- Students may resist becoming aware of strengths because that awareness may conflict with their current self-concept, producing conflict.
- Students may resist awareness of their strengths because they are afraid of success—either because their success may threaten others and lead to rejection or because they believe that successes only lead to more pressure to achieve and to more responsibilities.
- Students may have been criticized for their strengths and come to believe that their strengths are actually weaknesses.

AFFIRMING STUDENTS' STRENGTHS: EASING THE TRANSITION TO COLLEGE

The Nature of the Transition to College

To understand a student's transition to college, we must first understand what influences students to go to college in the first place. Research on the "decision to go to college" has consistently pointed out that the most critical and influential factors are elements of the student's background. In many ways, it is these external factors (as opposed to the student's own internal characteristics) that influence the decision to go to college (Tinto, 1987; Trent & Medsker, 1967). These external, background factors include parental values and encouragement, the values and goals of peers in high school, cultural values and expectations, positive experiences with teachers and counselors, exposure to college educated people, and the emphasis that churches and other community organizations place on higher education.

The student's own expectations also play an important role as they transition to college. If students have unrealistic or inaccurate expectations about the college experience, they may succumb to what has been called the "freshman myth" or "matriculant myth" and are likely to encounter greater difficulties adjusting to college (Baker, McNeil, & Siryk, 1985). Students who are less familiar with the college they choose to attend, do not participate in campus activities, perform poorly in classes, or change majors frequently are significantly more likely to experience the matriculant myth and tend to leave college before graduating.

The critical factors during the transition to college fall into three categories: (1) the process of disconnecting from background/external factors, (2) the types of attributions students make concerning their abilities and likelihood of success in college, and (3) the extent to which students have a strong motivation and a positive attitude toward themselves and the college experience (Astin, 1975 & 1984; Noel & Levitz, 1996; Rose, 1989; Tinto, 1987; Trent & Medsker, 1967).

The "Force Field Analysis of College Persistence" (Anderson, 1985) provides one way to visualize the issues that surface as students transition to college. The "Force Field" diagram illustrates that for students to successfully transition to college and then persist to graduation, there must be forces of greater magnitude pushing in a positive direction than forces pushing in a negative direction.

The problem for students transitioning into college is that when students enter college, they typically disconnect and have less contact with many of the powerful external positive forces that influenced them and supported them as they prepared to go to college. This results in a substantial period of adjustment and readjustment. The dynamics involved in this period represent a crisis for many students. For some it is traumatic. And for virtually all students these are periods of considerable self-doubt, discouragement,

disorientation, and feeling vulnerable. For this reason, the advising relationship becomes pivotal in helping students make a successful transition to college.

The Potential Role of Affirming Students' Strengths as They Transition into College

We can't think of anything more beneficial than helping students identify and affirm their strengths as they transition into college. What we know about people who are "resilient" and able to make positive transitions indicates three things: (1) they are more aware of their strengths (Meichenbaum, 1999), (2) they make more positive attributions about their own abilities (Weiner, 1991), and (3) they become more personally involved in the college experience and connect with other students, faculty, and staff (Astin, 1975, 1977, 1984, 1993; Tinto, 1987).

Helping students become more aware of their strengths and helping them see how their strengths relate to being successful in college is directly beneficial as they transition to college. Becoming more aware of how their strengths relate to success in college reduces the students' self-doubt and fears of failure, while it increases their confidence and motivation to achieve in college. Moreover, as students become more aware of their strengths and how their strengths relate to college success, they will make the types of attributions that will actually build their motivation (Weiner, 1991). Finally, as students become more aware of their strengths and how their strengths relate to being successful college students, they will feel like they "belong in college," which will positively influence their involvement and help them become connected within the college experience.

COMPONENTS OF A STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH TO ACADEMIC ADVISING

1. *Assessing to discover strengths, gifts, talents, skills, abilities, aptitudes, habits, beliefs, knowledge, and curiosities that have been used or could be used for achievement.*

Assessing students' strengths can be a formal process using specific instruments that are available, such as the StrengthsFinder. But this assessment can also be an informal interviewing process. For example, asking the following types of questions can help students assess their strengths:

- What did you learn with the greatest ease in high school?
- What did your teachers compliment you about?
- In what areas do you feel you have the greatest academic skills?
- What do your friends say they like best about you?
- How do you learn best?
- On what types of tests do you score highest?
- What was your favorite assignment?
- What subjects do you enjoy studying the most? (Hovland, Anderson, McGuire, Crockett, Kaufmann, & Woodward, 1997)

2. *Analyzing strengths to identify the specific attributes that are the strongest and most responsible for producing success experiences.*
Using StrengthsFinder, talk with the student about his or her Signature Themes. Interview the student about his or her successful experiences and what led to success in each event.
3. *Increasing student awareness, acceptance, and appreciation of their strengths, talents, and abilities—and validating students in terms of how their strengths can produce success in college.*
 - Which of your strengths do you feel are most characteristic of you?
 - In what settings do you most frequently use these strengths?
 - How have these strengths helped you succeed in the past?
 - In which of your academic tasks have you used these strengths?
4. *Discussing aspirations and determining (a) which of their strengths they want to develop further; (b) how they plan to use their strengths to pursue their hopes and dreams during and after college, and (c) what new areas they may want to investigate and how they might use their strengths in that process.*
 - Which of your strengths do you want to develop while in college?
 - In what ways do you want to develop these strengths?
 - What images come to mind when you think about fully developing these strengths?
 - What college experiences, classes, extracurricular activities, or internships could you use to develop the strengths?
5. *Generating a plan of action with the student for how strengths can be developed further and aspirations pursued through courses and involvement in extracurricular activities, work, and community service.*
 - In what areas do you most want to achieve while in college?
 - Which of your strengths do you think might help you achieve in those areas?
 - How could you specifically apply your strengths to help you succeed in those areas where you most want to achieve?
 - Which campus activities would enable you to capitalize on your strengths most?
 - What kind of internship, work, or community service provides the type of environment where your strengths will flourish?
6. *Making student motivation the focus of educational planning and course selection advising. Draw out and clarify the following issues and match them to courses and programs of study.*
 - Students' learning strengths
 - Students' intellectual interests
 - Students' curiosities
 - How students want to change in college
 - What skills and personal qualities students want to develop
 - What students want to experience while in college
 - Students' desired college outcomes
 - What students want to know and be able to do as a result of their college experience
 - How much time and energy students have and are willing to invest in their college experience

7. *Designing academic advising around principles of informed course selection, which justifies course enrollment based upon the following:*

- Consistency with the students' strengths
- Compatibility between the students' preparation and faculty expectations regarding background knowledge, learning skill, and performance skill
- Intellectual interests and curiosities of the students that will be addressed in the course and thus serve as a source of motivation to learn
- Perceived benefits and therefore motivation for taking the course in terms of how the course will help students (a) become the kinds of people they want to be, (b) develop skills they want to possess, and (c) experience the personal growth for which they perceive a need
- Available time and energy to meet course demands within the framework of personal, family, extracurricular, and financial responsibilities
- How the student plans to use the course in fulfilling graduation requirements and graduate school or career entry requirements

8. *Helping students apply their strengths in the career planning process.*

- Which of your strengths do you want to be able to use every day in your career?
- Which of your strengths do you want to see grow and flourish in your career?
- In what types of careers do you think that you will be able to use your strengths most frequently?
- In what careers do you think your strengths will grow and flourish?

9. *Using a strengths-based approach to improve adjustment.*

- In the past, which of your strengths did you rely on to get through difficult times?
- When you have struggled with similar problems in the past, which of your strengths helped you resolve the problems?
- Which of your strengths do you think can help you most at this time?
- How could you apply one of your strengths to help you deal with this difficulty?

ADVISING CASE STUDIES WITH STRENGTHSFINDER RESULTS

Below are several case studies of student advising sessions. After each vignette is a suggestion for how the advisor might approach the session from a strengths-based perspective.

Julie is a first-year student who has come in for help in choosing her second semester courses. Her Signature Themes are Achiever, Arranger, Significance, Maximizer, and Connectedness. As she describes her first semester, she expresses frustration at being overworked yet still not getting to pursue all the options she has. She has overcommitted herself by becoming involved in too many campus organizations, she is interested in several different possible majors, and she is heavily involved in service learning opportunities. She is exhausted and yet excited. How would you help her channel her strengths, so that they are a better match for the opportunities in her environment?

Because many of Julie's strengths center around an ability to set and achieve goals, helping her with goal selection and mapping out steps toward achieving important goals would be first. Once you have discussed with her what her life goals are and how they connect to her values, discuss her

extracurricular activities and help her select the ones that (a) are most congruent with her values and life goals, (b) give her recognition and ways of being appreciated by others, and (c) connect with what she is most interested in academically. Encourage her to select service learning sites that will give her experience in areas she is considering as a potential major. Point out that her innate ability to organize and prioritize can be used to succeed scholastically through academic “To Do” lists, written logs of activities and her progress toward her goals, and keeping a daily planner or calendar of her commitments. What may help Julie most is to learn how to make her activities meet more than one goal—for example, she could work with a professor on a research project and thereby gain academic credit or work-study pay but also gain work experience, form a strong relationship with a professor, learn some new skills, and learn more about a potential major.

John is a first-year student who is struggling in his classes. He has received three midterm warnings. He has average SAT scores, comes from a middle-class home, is the youngest of three children, lives about 30 miles away and goes home a lot, and plays two sports. He was an average high school student. His Signature Themes are Adaptability, Competition, Self-Assurance, Significance, and Positivity. How would you help him use these strengths to succeed in the classroom?

Most likely John has seen the fruits of many of his strengths in the athletic arena. The ability to transfer these strengths into the classroom is an important next step for him. His strength of Competition can be used in the classroom to (a) ask professors for their expectations and for specific feedback on assignments (which will also capitalize on his Significance strength), (b) seek out the best students in the class and find out what they do to achieve,

and (c) set attainable goals and measure his progress each step of the way. His strength of Self-Assurance can be used by helping him see that the way he approaches an athletic event (regular practice, pushing himself to greater and greater skill levels, and feeling confident that he can achieve his goals) can be applied to the classroom in regularly reading and “practicing” for class and setting daily goals for himself. His Adaptability strength will mean that when his day doesn’t go as planned he can adjust and still carve out time to “practice” for classes.

Jane is a sophomore who is completely undecided about her major and her future—still. She regularly comes in for advising, always listens to others’ advice, and has changed her mind five times already. She is panicked because she has to declare a major “for real” in about two weeks. Her Signature Themes are Belief, Woo, Relator, Harmony, and Empathy.

Because Jane’s strengths are predominantly relational, she can begin to narrow down her major and career options into fields that will capitalize on her interest in developing relationships with people. Because Belief is her top theme, it is important for her major and career to be congruent with her value system, so a work environment with a strong sense of mission will be a good fit. While Jane appears to listen to others’ advice, it may be more helpful for her to choose one or two people whom she truly admires and talk with them about their work and their values, rather than listening to everyone who has an opinion for her. Job shadowing might be an effective

experience for Jane, once she chooses a person whose values she really connects with. Encouraging her to be a peer tutor or peer counselor, or to think through what she has enjoyed most in her extracurricular activities and/or her service learning experiences might also be a helpful strategy. The key is to get her to talk about her fulfilling experiences and to see what those all have in common; that will provide a clue for a possible major and career.

Joe is a first-year student who is African-American and comes from inner city Philadelphia. He grew up in a neighborhood and went to a school where it was not “cool” to be smart. He was conditionally accepted because although his high school grades and SATs were not stellar, he had strong recommendations for his leadership skills. He knows he wants to work in Urban Policy after he graduates, but right now doesn’t have the grades to be accepted into the Urban Studies major. He has one more semester to turn it around. His Signature Themes are Communication, Command, Achiever, Ideation, and Strategic.

Stanford psychologist Claude Steele (1997) has written extensively on the concept of “stereotype threat”—the experience of entering a situation where there is a culturally stereotyped expectation of poor performance. Steele has documented this phenomenon with women and math, as well as with African-American students and academic achievement in general. It is critical for Joe to recognize that he has enormous strengths and the ability to succeed in college, but Joe will also need to “reframe” his college experience. Have him talk with other students who are not African-American but came from poor high schools, so he can see that his race is not the reason he may be struggling with the college environment. It may also help for him to talk to students who have similar strengths, so he can learn their

strategies for success. His strengths of Achiever and Strategic mean that he can set big goals for himself to achieve and will want to track his progress. He can envision the “big picture” of someday working in Urban Policy, and can use his strengths to set daily goals toward reaching this dream. His theme of Ideation means he would benefit from talking with professors after class and during office hours, to expand on the concepts introduced in class; relationships with professors may well be the key to Joe’s success. His strengths of Communication and Command make him a good candidate for a study group; in this group he can learn that teaching others is the best way of learning class material. He can also use the study group to challenge ideas and to be a sounding board for his paper outlines.

Jill is a sophomore who is considering dropping out of school “for a while” because she doesn’t know what to do with her life. She is a good student but has yet to find anything that arouses her curiosity or excites her. She has been disappointed with her classes so far, does not feel challenged, and thinks she just needs some time away. Her Signature Themes are Deliberative, Context, Restorative, Consistency, and Intellection.

The key for Jill is going to be finding something that motivates her. The first step is helping her see that college is the best place for her to be asking these questions. Dropping out is not likely to provide many insights about meaning and purpose in life, particularly when her strength of Intellection means that she will thrive in settings where she can be constantly thinking, studying, and learning. Ask her what she is passionate about outside of class. Ask her to tell you about experiences she has had in her life where

she accomplished something that gave her an enormous sense of satisfaction. Look for the common threads in these stories that would connect to certain types of classes or to academic disciplines. Her strengths of Context and Restorative suggest that History, Religion, or Philosophy might intrigue her. Encourage her to take a wide variety of courses that match her strengths so that she can learn about new areas that might interest her. Encourage her to take a course that has a reputation for being challenging but engaging, so she will be stretched.

Jeff is a senior looking for an internship experience. He is a Communications major but has no idea what kind of internship would work best for him. Help him find the right kind of internship experience or environment. He has the Signature Themes of Communication, Individualization, Responsibility, Developer, and Maximizer.

Because Jeff has the strength of Communication, he can feel confident he has chosen a major that is a good match for his strengths. The kind of internship that can capitalize best on his strengths is one that will allow him to use his communication skills to persuade and motivate others (Maximizer), but can also provide opportunities to work individually to encourage people and help them develop their talents (Individualization and Developer). Because of his Responsibility and Individualization themes, he may thrive in an environment where there is little overt supervision, where he is given room to create and accomplish tasks. Ask him questions about specific talents and skills he has acquired in his major that he would like to develop further, then encourage him to seek out an internship that enables him to use those skills but also nourishes his strengths themes.

Jackie is a junior who is trying to decide on graduate school. She is very intelligent, has exceptional grades and test scores, and has a portfolio of experiences and internships that make her a strong candidate for graduate study in psychology. However, she feels very unsure about the kind of graduate school program that would fit her best. She brings you information about her top three choices and wants help deciding because she's stuck. The first school is a rigorous, highly intellectual and demanding, research-based program. The second school has a very flexible and individualized approach, while still maintaining high standards. Students basically design their own program. The third school is small, not as well-known, but offers strong relationships between faculty and students and a chance for students to immediately become involved in the department through teaching and/or research. Given her Signature Themes of Learner, Input, Intellection, Analytical, and Focus, what would you recommend and how would you help her?

Jackie may very well succeed in any of these environments, but she is an excellent match for a highly demanding research-based program because of her strengths themes. All her themes are in the thinking domain and indicate that she will thrive in an environment that expects high levels of critical thinking and analysis, provides depth in a particular subject, and encourages research. Because of her strength of Input, an individualized program may not meet her needs because it does not provide enough structure around her learning experiences and she may "get into" a subject so much that she never completes her assignments. The rigorous research-based program will nurture her strengths best by providing continual new demands and a multitude of opportunities for her thinking themes to shine.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: WHAT IS AN EDUCATOR'S ROLE FROM THE STRENGTHS-BASED APPROACH?

There are significant differences between the roles of a traditional educator and the roles of an educator who adopts the strengths-based approach. The biggest role difference emanates from the fact that the strengths-based educator is trying to discover and develop a student's strengths as opposed to identify and remediate the student's deficits. The specific roles of a strengths-based educator are as follows:

1. *Assessing Strengths*: This role is demanding in that it requires an understanding of (a) which strengths are needed for achievement in specific courses and (b) which strengths are needed to persist and gain maximum benefits from the college experience. In addition, the strengths-based educator must have interviewing skills and an ability to interpret instruments designed to identify strengths, skills, and abilities. In reality, most assessments will be informal interviews rather than standardized tests. The key to the strengths assessment process is an educator who actively seeks to know and understand students as persons and who agrees with the idea that achievement will result most effectively from identifying and building on the strengths of a student.
2. *Mirroring Strengths and Increasing Awareness of Strengths*: This is the all-important role of a strengths-based educator. It demands outstanding interpersonal skills because strengths must be reflected in a manner that raises the students' awareness of their strengths. Students need to see, accept, and appreciate their strengths in order to increase their motivation, confidence, and efficacy and thereby increase their achievement.
3. *Orchestrating Opportunities to Build Strengths*: Whether the educator is a classroom instructor, advisor, or tutor, the strengths-based approach fosters a pattern of achievement within students by first having them build and develop their strengths. But this requires helping students make good choices about appropriate courses, services, clubs, organizations, and recreational activities. Like an orchestra conductor, the strengths-based educator tries to pull together services and opportunities so that students can use their strengths, build those strengths, and expand the strengths to their full potential.
4. *Affirming and Celebrating Progress*: The strengths-based educator is not only similar to an orchestra conductor but is also like a detective and investigator—except that attention is focused on the positive. Instead of trying to “catch” someone doing something wrong, this approach tries to “catch” students doing things right and making it possible for them to excel, gain confidence, and grow their strengths. As strengths are discovered, as progress (rather than perfection) is made, and as students experience themselves “soaring with their strengths,” the strengths-based educator affirms and celebrates the achievement.

As Don Clifton and Paula Nelson states, *Soar With Your Strengths* (1992), strengths develop best within the context of a supportive relationship. When educators adopt the strengths-based approach described above, the student is likely to experience the relationship as supportive. With this foundation, the student has a greater chance of fulfilling his or her potential and achieving success in college—and beyond.

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