



Lessons Learned on the Journey: How One College Became Comprehensively Strengths-Based

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The Grand Experiment: Four Years -- \$464,000 from FIPSE

Most people know what they want to be when they grow up. Then they get to college, change their majors five or six times, and end up in careers that have little or nothing to do with their degrees. It's a story that pans out in colleges and universities all across the country, but particularly those with a "liberal arts" emphasis – that focus less on teaching a trade and more on developing well-rounded, complete people. But liberal arts schools still end up with graduates who, despite their critical thinking skills, play games of hit or miss with their careers. Greenville College hopes to change that, for the better. And in the process, the school might just set a new standard in post-secondary education.

The college is working in cooperation with The Gallup Organization, the group responsible for producing arguably the most reliable and accurate surveys and statistics used by the media and the general public. Gallup also delves extensively into helping businesses get more out of their employees, and the organization has developed a tool called a "StrengthsFinder" – a test that identifies those aspects of an individual's personality that help him or her meet life goals.

GC is the first college or university in the country to transfer the StrengthsFinder comprehensively to an academic setting. Other undergraduate institutions have used the Gallup tool to a limited degree, but never as a key aspect of a student's entire four (or five or six) year undergraduate education. What is perhaps even bigger news, at least on-campus, is how GC is incorporating the Gallup tool into a major change in the school's fundamental educational requirements that focus even more on cultivating a young adult's mind, body and soul. In short, the college will help incoming students early on to discover their own strengths, and to use this knowledge to determine a major and a career, without precluding the benefits of a liberal arts education.

CORE Curriculum

For about seven years, GC administrators and faculty have wanted to change the school's general education requirements – the basic courses that all students must take, regardless of their majors. At liberal arts schools like GC, the general education courses tend to be more numerous – and critical to the overall aims of the school – and are often referred to an institution's "core curriculum." Until this year, the core curriculum had not changed at GC since 1968.

The new curriculum features "a much more structured and purposeful tracking of general education requirements," said

GC & Gallup

Finding Your STRENGTHS

Dr. S. Bradley Shaw, director of general education and English professor at GC. "There is a high degree of excitement among faculty about the new CORE curriculum," said Shaw. He added that the college faculty, which often represents opinions as diverse as the students who attend the college, voted unanimously in favor of the general education changes.

The most obvious modification is the reorganization of class credits and class schedules. In the past, the college worked on a "four credit" system – most courses, when completed over

the span of a semester, would earn a student four credits, or points, toward the graduation requirement of 132 credits. Students would attend class four days a week, with Wednesday as sort of a midweek weekend. Now, the college has gone to a "three-two" system. Major courses are now only worth three credits rather than four, but students only have to go to any particular three-credit class three times a week, on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. Two-credit courses are taught on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

This change, although technically not part of the core curriculum change, works in tandem with the latter. The transition to a three-two system allows more courses to be taught (actually, more courses have to be completed in order to meet the credit amount required for graduation), which means that more general education courses can be added.

The CORE curriculum has also changed in that many general education courses are now more "interdisciplinary" – they incorporate several subjects (such as science and philosophy) into one class. The most critical classes to do this are the four new CORE classes, which a student must take each year for four years. During the fall semester of the freshman year, a new student is to enroll in the Cornerstone Seminar, which reviews the "foundations in the liberal arts tradition." This is followed by the Introduction to Christian Thought and Life class during the sophomore year, and the Foundations of Science during the junior year. The student's GC career, assuming it only lasts four years, culminates in the Capstone Seminar, an "integration across the disciplines."

These CORE courses are where the StrengthsFinder comes into play. The interdisciplinary aspects of the Gallup tool allow test results to be incorporated easily into them. "One goal of the CORE courses is to get students to be self-reflective, to discover who they are," said Shaw. Students are enabled to discover "their callings, their purposes in life, and how their strengths complement that."

StrengthsFinder

The StrengthsFinder test initially appears to be very similar to most other personality tests that people often take in a high school guidance course. The test taker is given two seemingly opposing situations, values or philosophies, and then asked to rank which one applies more to him or her. This is a common format for such exams. The difference in the StrengthsFinder from other personality tests, according to Dr. Chip Anderson, a graduate school professor at both the University of California Los Angeles and Azusa Pacific University in California, is what specifically the Gallup tool measures.

Anderson, who helped the Gallup organization to develop the StrengthsFinder, has worked with GC to introduce the exam to the college faculty, staff and students.

Most personality tests are based on theories about personalities. For example, the well-known Myers-Briggs exam is based on the theories of psychologist Carl Jung. These tests tell you what kind of person you are, what previously identified personality type you fit. But the Gallup test uses a different foundation. The initial designer of the StrengthsFinder, Donald Clifton, president of The Gallup Organization, was being asked by large corporations to use his skills to help select people for

About the Presenters

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- Brandon D. Hill, Ph.D.



The Grand Experiment:

- How we got acquainted with strengths
- Our contribution to the Strengths Revolution at Greenville College
- One way this project changed our lives

How It All Began



Nine campus leaders on a 13-hour van ride to the First-Year Experience Conference

- Faculty Leaders
- Dean of Students
- Director of Student Success

- Examples of exemplary FYE programs
- Commitment to scatter and learn
- Exposure to four different approaches to strengths programming
- Commitment to having a plan before the group returned to campus

Recommendation: Find a way to involve a group of campus leaders in exposure to the strengths philosophy (Noel-Levitz, NACADA, Gallup conferences, etc.)

The Positive Psychology Movement

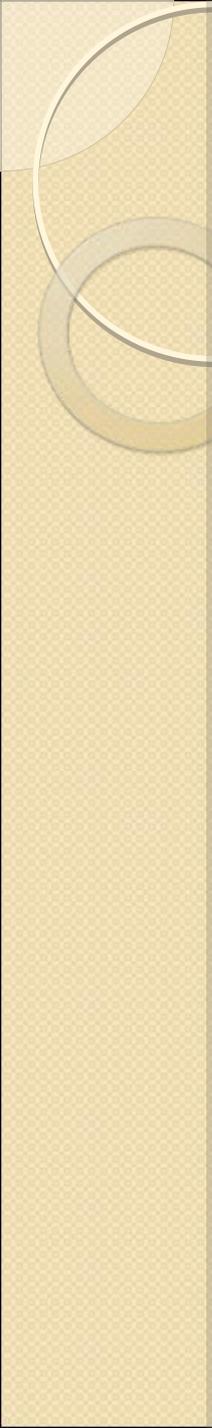
- 1998 Martin Seligman, president of APA
- Shifted the focus to “optimal functioning” – what contributes to mental health and well-being
- Focus is on “*fulfilled individuals and thriving organizations*” -- hope, wisdom, virtues, good marriages, healthy families, productive lives, schools where students learn, communities where citizens are engaged

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

(journal: *Positive Organizational Scholarship*)



The Strengths Perspective

“You start seeing people in terms of who they are ... rather than in terms of who they aren’t...”

--Chip Anderson, 2000



Student Reaction

- “I shook my head in somewhat disbelief. These results really did describe me, but four out of five of them I have seen as my greatest downfalls and weaknesses. ‘How can these things be my strengths?’” I asked myself silently.... But, this class has taught me that these are my strengths. I do not have to be ashamed of them and using these strengths in a beneficial manner will help me in the long run.”
(Female Senior)

What We Did: Creating a Strengths-Friendly Campus through Faculty

- Find Various Ways for Faculty to “Plug In”
 - In General Education Courses
(COR 101; COR 301; COR 401)
 - In Discipline-Specific Courses
(Psychology, Music, Business, Religion)
 - Three Faculty Paid to Advise Undeclared Students Using Strengths
 - (Faculty) Coaches Trained to Work with Athletes
 - “Learning Contracts” for Students on Probation
 - Faculty Interviews and Hiring

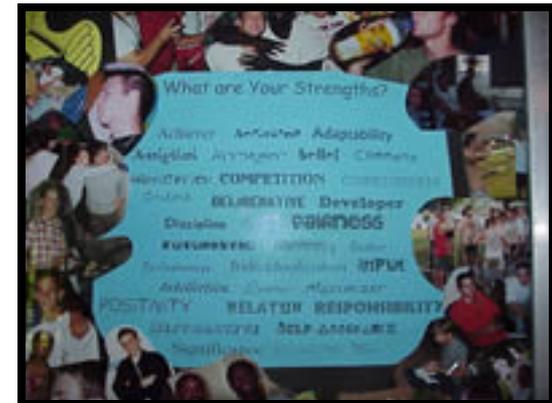
What the Strengths Revolution Looks Like at Greenville College

Strengths Across the Curriculum

- *StrengthsQuest* as part of the first-year seminar (**COR 101**) required of all freshmen. Each COR 101 instructor is asked to devote at least three class sessions to the *StrengthsFinder* results.
 - Example: Write a one-page paper on how you will apply one strength to assist with one assignment within the next 48 hours.
- The **COR 301** course for transfer students has been redesigned with a strengths-based perspective.
- The interdisciplinary senior capstone course (**COR 401**) involves students working in small groups which must reflect a variety of academic majors and a constructive mix of students' strengths.

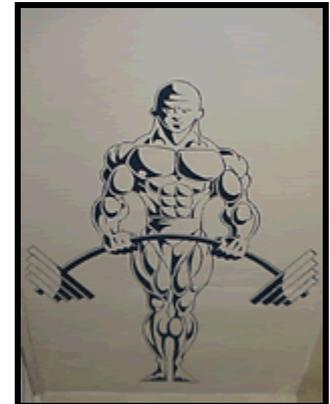
What We Did: Creating a Strengths-Friendly Campus through Student Life

- **Residence Life Programming** related to strengths is offered in an array of formats throughout various halls.
- **Culture Building** through Residence Hall Mission statements, bulletin boards, door boards, and hall shirts
- **“Care Team” Meetings** with at-risk students always involve, and usually begin with, a conversation about the student’s strengths.
- The **“Learning Contract”** completed by each student on academic probation includes a listing of the student’s strengths.



What We Did: Creating a Strengths-Friendly Campus through Student Life

- The “**Counselor Intake Form**” used in the Counseling Center includes a listing of the student’s top five strengths.
- Resident Assistants of Freshmen completed **Strengths Interviews** with freshmen students.
- **Student Discipline Meetings** were held with a strengths focus.
- **Resident Assistant Selection and Training** had strengths components.



Campus-Wide Visibility to Strengths

- Greenville's Intranet site includes a "sort" mechanism allowing employees to see the strengths of other employees (with their permission) and to do a sort by each of the 34 strengths to see which employees have that strength.
- All students in Greenville's degree completion program (currently 200+) use *Now, Discover Your Strengths* as a textbook in the first module, with about two hours devoted to helping the cohort understand and apply their strengths as these adult students return to college.
- All faculty and staff have been given a personalized "strengths plaque" that can be posted outside the office door or placed on a desk or office shelf.

Wide Visibility to Strengths (continued)

- Several athletic coaches incorporated awareness of strengths in team-building and linking athletic success to academic success.
- Each Board of Trustee committee spent time with a campus “Strengths Coach” to discuss their individual strengths and how the committees could work more effectively around their strengths.
- The student newspaper ran weekly a “StrengthsFinder Horoscope” for several months, as well as several articles about the strengths project.

Student Humor Around Strengths

Your Strength Finders Horoscope for the week of: February 13-20

Harmony

Your Care Bear Stare is a formidable weapon--until you realize how pathetic it is.

Competition

Screw this Just War Theory!

Command

This Valentine's Day, don't make the same mistake you did last year... "Submit" is not a term of endearment.

Ideation

You're stuck in a room with a notebook, a nun, and a bucket. What do you do?

Maximizer

Stop sending us all those e-mails. It's embarrassing.

Your StrengthsFinder Horoscope for the week of: February 27-March 4

Learner

Your impressive GPA does little to change the fact that your classmates all think you are a total dork.

Activator

Do not push the button. I repeat, DO NOT PUSH THE BUTTON!

Futuristic

Don't spend time sitting by the Holophone for that special someone to call--hop on the Hoverboard and blast on over there!

Intellection

Your lack of close friends is actually due to the fact that you are cold and emotionless.

Restorative

You will lose a leg in a Hoverboard accident. Think of ways to get more organized while your limb grows back.

Student Interest in Strengths

The Strengths of Jesus

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In my Synoptic Gospel's class, a statement by Brian Hartley made me very happy. He said that the writer of the Gospel of Luke probably had the strength of context. This brought up an interesting question. What strengths would Jesus have? Later in the day, Matt Wright challenged me to tackle this question in an article. This is however, too big of a challenge to fit into one article. Therefore I will attempt to deal with this quandary in a series of articles.

There is a temptation to assume that Jesus very naturally had all 34 strengths from the Strengthsfinder test. This, I believe, is a temptation that we must avoid. Not because Jesus was not perfect, but because the Strengthsfinder is a human creation and therefore imperfect. Much as it pains me to admit that, it is true. Well then, you ask, what strengths did Jesus have?

First of all, I think that it is

made very clear to us that Jesus had the strength of command. I might even go so far as to say that it may have been his number one strength. Look at how he sees what needs to be done, and how others envy his power and talents. In the synoptic gospels, there are numerous examples of Jesus exercising his strength of command. He commands and casts out demons on numerous occasions, (Matt 8:16-17, 8:28-34, Mark 1:25-28, 3:12, Luke 4:34-37, 4:41). He commands the many crowds that follow him, (Matt 4:25, 12:15, Mark 3:7-8, Luke 6:17). He commands the disciples, as when he commands Peter to catch people, (Luke 5:10). This guy even commands the winds and the waves to obey Him, (Matt 8:26, Mark 4:39, Luke 8:24).

What of the strength of communication? Would this have been a strength that our Lord and Savior would have had? Most people would assume that he did, since he did come to bring a message, but I would contend that the gospels are very unclear about it, and seem to waver between his

clearness of speech and a lack of the ability to communicate his point well at all. Look at all of the times in the synoptic gospels when he speaks in parables, to his disciples and others, none of whom seem to understand, (Matt 13:3-15, 18-50, Mark 3:23-30, 4:1-10, 13-34, Luke 8:4-18, 11:17-23). There are copious examples of the disciples misunderstanding something that Jesus is trying to say to them, (Matt 15:15-16, 16:8, Mark 7:17-18, 8:17).

The Gospel of Bartholomew deals very specifically with this question of Jesus' communication strength, for in the beginning passage, Jesus is questioned by the disciples, (I am using the Slavonic translation, not the Greek), and can give no clear answer, rather, he hedges around the question to leave them even more confused than before. Yet later in the same account, as Bartholomew is pressing him for answers, he is able to very clearly describe in detail to Bartholomew the events that transpired. In the Resurrection Gospel of Bartholomew, (not to

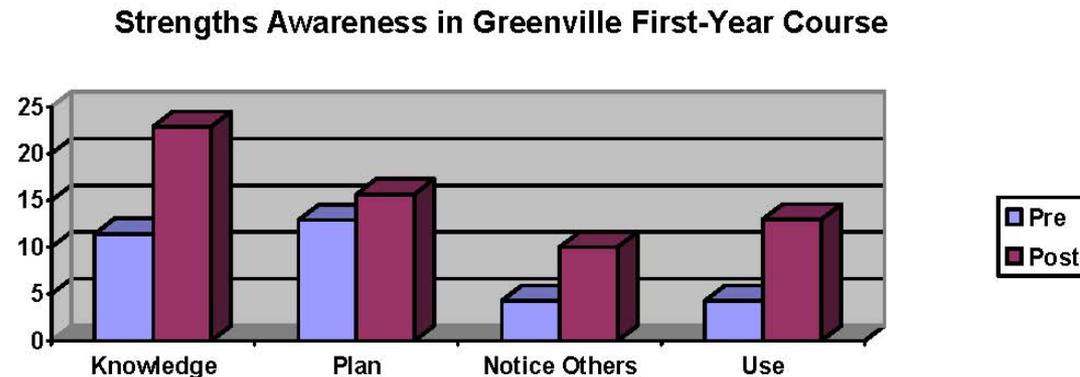
be confused with the Gospel of Bartholomew), there is a record of Jesus speaking in an unknown tongue to the disciples. That doesn't seem to be an effective way to communicate a point.

And look at the entire Sayings Gospel of Thomas. It is absolutely chock-full of instances of the disciples' misunderstandings of what Jesus is truly trying to say. He is not communicating any of his points very well here, according to Thomas. On the other hand, in the Arabic Infancy Gospel, in the very first verse, the baby Jesus looks up at Mary from the manger and declares "I am Jesus, the Son of God, the *Logos*, whom thou hast brought forth, as the angel Gabriel announced to thee; and my Father has sent me for the salvation of the world." This seems to be very good communication. He stated his point very clearly here. So there are plenty of points to be made for either side of the argument of Jesus having the strength of communication.

More to follow in later articles.

What Did We Learn from this Grand Experiment?

Strengths Awareness Increased Significantly



[Scale: Percent “strongly agreeing” with the impact statement.]

What Did We Learn from this Grand Experiment?

Students were helped to learn more about themselves.

They were motivated to try harder.

They saw how their strengths can be used to further their future goals.

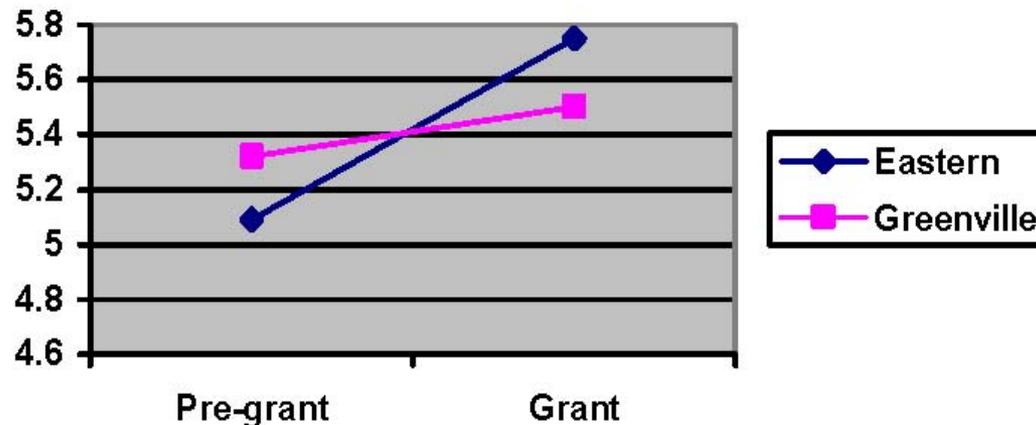
They saw the connection between their strengths and God's calling in their lives.

They learned to rely on their strengths to accomplish tasks.

What Did We Learn from this Grand Experiment?

Student Ratings of Academic Advising Improved at Both Institutions

Advising Effectiveness

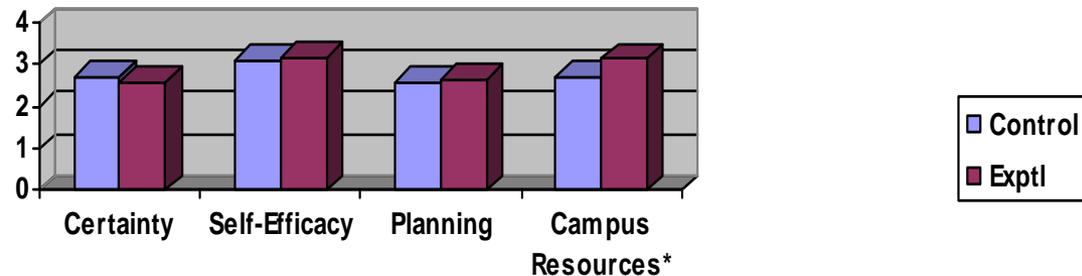


What Did We Learn from this Grand Experiment?

In addition to strengths awareness, sophomores reported:

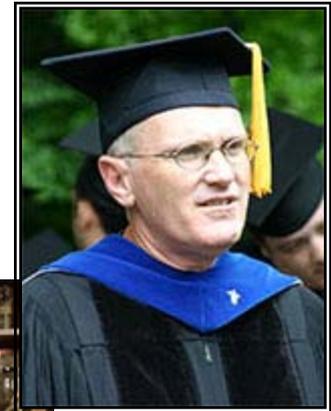
- greater career decision-making self-efficacy
- enhanced confidence in the career planning process
- and awareness of the campus resources available to students

Comparison of Career Certainty in Sophomores on Both Campuses

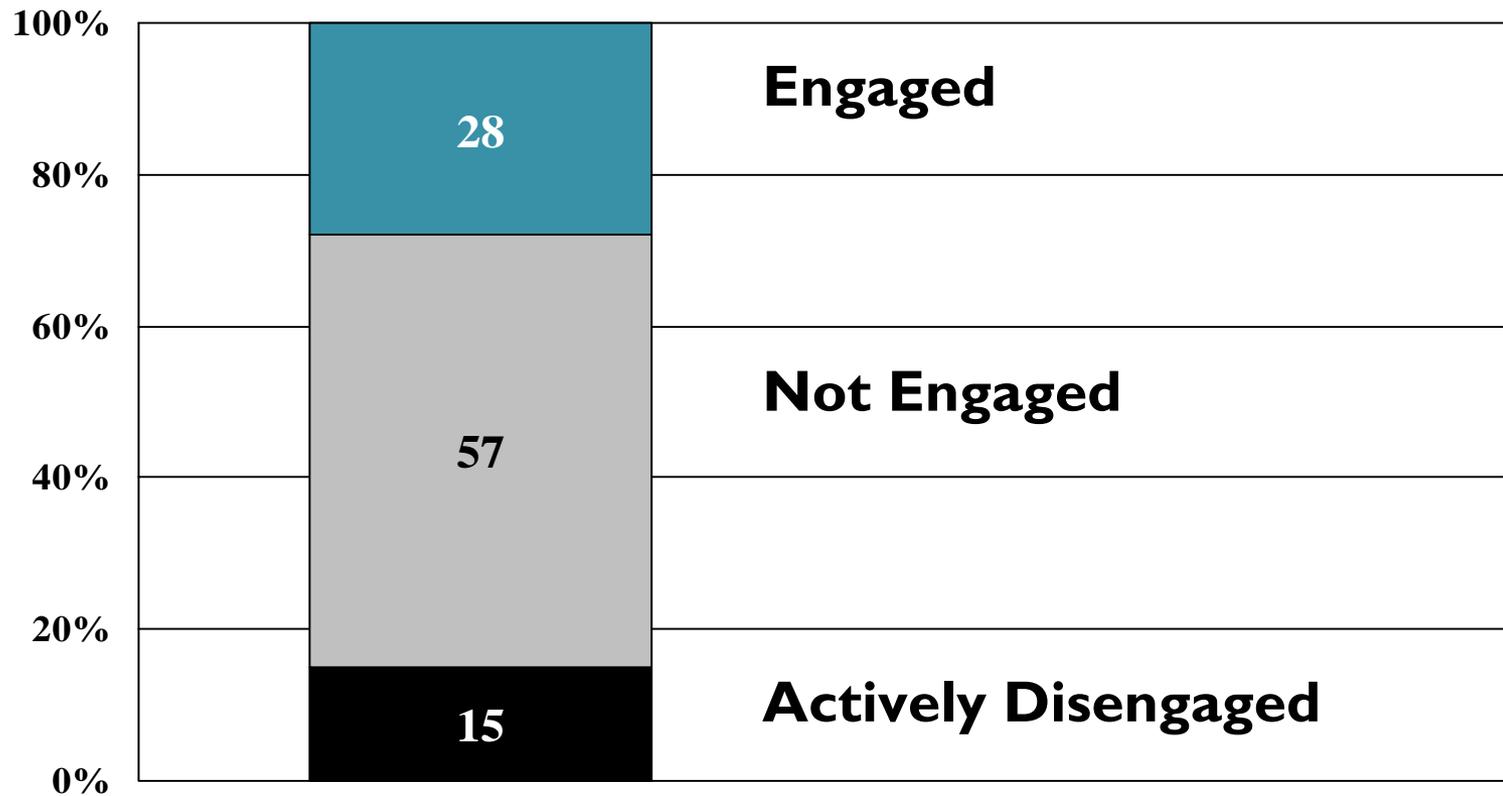


Lessons from the Trenches

- Not Everybody Will “Get It” or Want It - Ever
- Fan the Flame of Those Who Do!
- Students Love to Talk about Strengths!
- “Leaven” Can Have a Beneficial Impact from Many Directions
- “Users” Are Looking for Practical Help
- Ownership by Someone with Budget Clout Helps



What Might Others Learn? There will always be resistance to any new idea. Find the champions on your campus (students, faculty, administrators)!



U.S. Working Population

*Source: Gallup Poll data of U.S. working population 18 years and older, accumulated April – October 2005

What Might Others Learn? Students tend to love learning about their strengths

- Most students are encouraged and excited when they receive their strengths printout.
- Most students choose to *share their strengths* with someone within 24 hours.
- A strengths culture provides a vocabulary that is empowering and creates “belonging.”
- Without knowledgeable support, most students lack the skills for *capitalizing* on and fully developing talents into strengths.

What Might Others Learn? Various Approaches and Catalytic Groups

- Top Down – Greenville College and Azusa Pacific University
- Grass Roots/Bottom Up – Point Loma Nazarene University

What Might Others Learn?

Understand the Strengths of Those in Opposition; Respond Accordingly

- Certain Strengths Patterns tend to resonate with the strengths approach
- Certain Strengths Patterns are more cautious to accept new ideas

What Might Others Learn? Link Strengths to Institutional Mission and Student Flourishing

- Talents exist in every human being.
- Skills and knowledge (EDUCATION!) help hone talents into strengths.
- People have often felt criticized in areas related to their strengths.
- Every strength has a “shadow side.”
- Combinations of strengths are important.
- Every human being has value and immense potential. Our job is to help the next generation discover and develop all that has been built into them.

Creating a Strengths-Friendly Campus

What about the cost?

- Target spheres of influence
 - One person can make a difference
- Pass the cost to students (e.g. through bookstore, Career Services)
- Attract new budget dollars through proposals
- Reallocate budget expenses: Aligning budget planning with strengths philosophy



Q & A