A Holistic Assessment of a Campus-Wide Initiative to Build Strengths: From Building a Conceptual Framework to Reporting Results

AIR Forum
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History of Strengths

- Donald Clifton began studying unique strengths of leaders in the 1960s
- “What would happen if we studied what is right with people?”
- People gain more when they build on their strengths rather than spending effort to remediate their weaknesses
Development of StrengthsFinder

• The StrengthsFinder “…identifies areas where an individual’s greatest potential for building strengths exists.”

• 177 items; participants given 20 seconds
# 34 Talent Themes

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# Themes & Items

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## Our IR Office: Four Domains of Leadership Strength

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Development of StrengthsFinder

- Seven million people have taken StrengthsFinder
- Over one million college students have taken it since August of 2011
- Available in 26 languages, respondents from 50+ countries, accommodations for disabilities
- Over 10% of the first million respondents took SF in a language other than English
- One in 33 million: you are unique!
StrengthsFinder

• Reliability
  – Internal consistency ($\alpha = .52$ to $\alpha = .79$)
  – Six month test-retest reliability ($\alpha = .48$ to $\alpha = .80$)
  – (It is difficult to obtain high alphas for an instrument measuring 34 dimensions)

• Validity
  – Construct: less than 2% of item pairs fail to meet a 70% criterion
  – Construct: using “big five” factors of personality, correlations ranged between $.58$ and $.83$
Institutional Context

- University of Minnesota-Twin Cities
- 30,610 UG Fall 2011
- 12 UG Colleges (largest, CLA, has 14,723 students)
- Highly decentralized administrative environment
Challenges with Assessment

- Large public university with disaggregated and uncoordinated student outcomes assessment activities
  - Redundancy in campus data collection efforts
  - Variable quality of measurement and analysis
  - Negative impacts on response rates
  - Heavy reliance on self-reported data
  - Program implementation (ground up), depth & level varies greatly across campus; assessment often an afterthought
Solutions

• Survey advisory team
  – Monitor & Collaborations
  – Ease “Territorial” Issues
• Collaborations across domains
  • Faculty
  • Academic Affairs: Assessment of Learning
  • Student Affairs: Assessment of Student Development
  • Senior Management: Institutional Metrics
Solutions

– Align with institutional strategic objectives; broader context within a “holistic” assessment of the student experience
  • Better chance findings will be used and not just be “interesting”
– Institutional Research in unique position to serve as “bridge”
  • policy analysis, strategic planning, database management and methods
Strengths at UMTNC

• Strengths approach to enhance student engagement and well-being which leads to improved retention, graduation, and life success.

• Addresses major attrition factors:
  – Lack of motivation
  – Discouragement
  – Lack of engagement and connection
First-Year Students

• 5,122 non-transfer first-year students completed StrengthsFinder
• Many staff units/departments have taken it and participated in sessions focused on individual and team components
Goals for Students

• Increasing self-awareness; understanding and appreciation of others
• Developing potential in academics, career planning, leadership, relationships
• Creating a common language across campus
• Increasing overall confidence and sense of responsibility in pursuing their goals
• Advancing achievement of Student Learning and Development Outcomes
• Positively impacting retention, graduation, and satisfaction
StrengthsQuest “Touch Points”

- Welcome Week sessions
- Convocation (President’s office support)
- Advising sessions
- Housing and Residential Life
- Student Employee Leadership Program
- Some first year experience courses
- Some career courses
- Leadership Minor 1000 level class
- Student & Staff Brown Bag Sessions
- Student & Staff Workshops
Assessment Committee

• Established a committee in summer 2011
• 10-15 members, mostly staff and a few faculty
• Tasked with developing an assessment plan, choosing measures, developing instruments
**Strengths Impact Model**

**Student Characteristics**
- Descriptors that do not change (e.g., demographics)
- Factors in making college choice
- Expectations about college experience
- High school involvement
- Factors in making other decisions (i.e., living on-campus)

**Strengths Engagement**
- Intervention in environment
- Impact
- Involvement with
- Enthusiasm for

**Scales/Measures**
- Academic self-efficacy
- Engagement (social, academic, civic)
- Appreciation of diversity/difference
- Sense of belonging
- Hope

**Institutional & Individual Student Outcomes**
- Academic success (GPA)
- Retention
- Graduation
- Student satisfaction
- Career satisfaction
- Student learning & development outcomes

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Strengths Assessment Timeline for 2011-2012 Academic Year

Welcome Week Evaluation*
Strengths Impact Pre-Assessment*
Orientation & First Year Programs Fall Check-In Survey**
Strengths Impact Post-Assessment*
Orientation & First Year Programs Spring Check-In Survey**
End of the Year Strengths Impact Survey, Student Focus Groups, and Staff Survey

- * = Survey administered to all first-time, full-time freshmen in the Class of 2015
- ** = Survey administered to a random sample of first-time, full-time freshmen in the Class of 2015
Assessment Measures

- Academic Self-Efficacy (Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001)
- Gallup Q12 College Student Engagement (Cantwell, 2005)
- Strengths Awareness (Schreiner, 2004)
- Adult Trait Hope (Snyder, Thompson, Shorey, & Heinze, 2003)

- Additional items to learn more about FY students’ engagement with Strengths and the impact it has had on students
Results

- Pre-survey (September; all FY): $n = 2008$
- Post-survey (December; all FY): $n = 1493$
- End of the year survey (April; random sample ½ FY class): $n = 571$
- Responded to pre-and-post: $n = 934$
- Responded to all three: $n = 299$
Focus Groups

- Random sample of ½ FY students
- Five focus groups of 28 students
  - Tell us about your experience with Strengths this year.
  - What have been some of the highlights of your first year, and how have your Strengths played into or impacted those experiences?
  - What would make the Strengths approach more meaningful for you?
Interacting with Strengths matters!

• “I believe that knowing my Strengths and interacting with them as positively impacted me in the following areas” (end of the year survey; $n = 570$)
Interacting with Strengths matters!

- Impact on four measures (note: not on the same scale; from the end of the year survey and post-survey; $n = 297$)
Pre- and post-survey results

• Paired samples t-tests suggest students had gains in the following areas:
  – Strengths awareness
  – Student engagement

• Also, the positive impact of strengths:
  – Academic achievement
  – Feeling like I belong on campus
  – Developing as a leader
  – Getting involved in community service
  – Getting involved on campus
Greater outcomes

- First-to-second semester retention and three measures (note: not on the same scale; from the pre-survey; n = 1480)
Qualitative Results

- Pre-survey: “explain how knowing your strengths might influence your academic skills or performance in college.”
  - Several key themes:
    - Can leverage their strengths to enhance their academic performance and use their strengths in working with others to complete academic-related tasks.
    - Are better prepared to maximize their strengths in the workplace.
    - Can help them to motivate others, understand how others’ strengths influence a group’s dynamics, and understand how to best contribute to a group using their own strengths.
What worked?

- Collaboration
- Creativity
- Communication
- Support
- Enthusiasm
What Next?

• Continue refining assessment plan
• Continue refining measures used in assessment
• Sharing data with campus stakeholders
  – What works?
  – What needs improvement?
• Continue to report results
Questions?

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- Ron Huesman, huesm003@umn.edu