Developing College Students’ Leadership Development through Strengths Awareness

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Leadership Development in Higher Education

• Many higher education institutions are committed to student’s leadership development
  – Mission statements, increases in curricular and co-curricular leadership opportunities

• These experiences allow students to develop higher systematic leadership beliefs
Self-Awareness and Leadership

• Associations between self-awareness and leadership development
  – Lane and Chapman (2011): capability to apply strengths increased individual’s values of social change
  – (Wisner, 2011): adopting a philosophy of strengths = investing in strength development
Social Change Model of Leadership

• Consciousness of Self: awareness in beliefs, values and emotions that motivate engagement in social change

• Self-awareness increases self-efficacy, which allows individuals to engage in effective leadership practices
Strengths Awareness in College Students

• Can a strengths awareness-based approach help first-year college students develop leadership competencies?

• We investigated an institution that invested in the Clifton StrengthsFinder to facilitate first-year college students’ self-awareness and development.
Strengths at the U

• University of Minnesota offered the StrengthsFinder for free to all incoming first-year students from 2011 to 2014
• Approximately 95.4% (n = 5,122) of the incoming 2011 students took the StrengthsFinder to discover their top five talent themes
• Assessment all three years of the initiative
Strengths at the U

• Throughout the first semester, students engaged in a variety of activities
  – Discussions
  – Programming
  – Classes
  – Academic advising
  – Descriptive reports of students’ strengths-based interactions and engagement available at www.strengths.umn.edu
  – Online reports available for the campus—hosted by the Office of Institutional Research
Methods: Instruments & Participants

• First-year students’ strengths experiences and engagement survey
• Student Experience in the Research University (SERU) survey
• $n = 779, 14.5\%$
• Slightly overrepresented with White students and female students
Methods: Model & Measures

Block One
Demographics

Block Two
Pre-college Leadership

Block Three
College Experiences

Block Four
Strengths Awareness

Leadership
Results

- Pre-college leadership skills
- Classmate interactions
- Sense of belonging
- Campus involvement
- Academic engagement
- Strengths awareness
- Education major
- Business major
- International students
- STEM major
Discussion

• First-year students’ strengths awareness was positively associated with their leadership development

• Strengths awareness explained a significant amount of variance in students’ leadership development above and beyond the variance explained by blocks 1, 2, and 3
Recommendations

• Provide opportunities for students to assess their strengths (e.g., StrengthsFinder, Values in Action Inventory, Realise2, etc.)

• Seek training and resources (e.g., books, educator and mentorship training from Gallup, activities online)
Strengths Resources

- [www.strengthsquest.com](http://www.strengthsquest.com)
- [www.strengths.umn.edu](http://www.strengths.umn.edu)
Recommendations

• Embed strengths into programmatic efforts—intentionally develop teams or groups of students based on the diversity of their strengths
• Offer frequent affirmations of students’ strengths
# Recommendations

## The Four Domains of Leadership Strength

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Recommendations

- Practitioners: take a strengths assessment yourself
  - Demonstrate your own self-awareness
  - Model strengths in ways that positively promote students’ engagement
  - Provide opportunities for reflection
  - Visit our ILA strengths workshop this afternoon!
  - Have fun!
Check Out Our Strengths Publications!

- Soria, K. M., & Stubblefield, R. Building first-year students’ strengths and hope in transition. (revise and resubmit with the *College Student Affairs Journal*)
- Soria, K. M., & Taylor, Jr., L. Strengths-based approaches in college and university student housing: Implications for first-year students’ retention and engagement. (revise and resubmit with the *Journal of College and University Student Housing*)