

PROGRAM TITLE

Launching a Strengths-Based Education Initiative

PROGRAM ABSTRACT

One of the challenges in helping new students successfully transition into the campus community is helping them understand who they are and the role they play as a student. During this session, the presenters will explore the successes and challenges faced by one private institution in the effort to launch a strengths-based education initiative with the entire incoming freshman class in an effort to improve academic and social engagement. If you know your top 5 Strengths, bring them with you! Basic information about the StrengthsQuest assessment that was used to launch this initiative will be presented, but the focus of the presentation is on the philosophy, development, and administration of a large-scale initiative.

BRIEF OUTLINE/DESCRIPTION OF THE PRESENTATION

Goals of Presentation

This session will provide participants with:

- An understanding of strengths-based education
- An understanding of deficit-based remediation
- A step-by-step guide for launching this type of initiative
- An understanding of the benefits for a variety of departments and services
- An understanding of the implications of this approach for educators and students

Relationship to Theme

Launching this initiative with the entire incoming freshman class and only 5 months of planning was a HUGE risk with significant financial investment. However, we felt that the best way to make the biggest impact with the most students was to start big and see what happened. We also knew that getting students excited about this would be the most effective way of creating a grassroots effort to spread the concepts across campus to other students, faculty and staff. It was definitely a BOLD move. However, we discovered that being bold initially doesn't mean that you won't eventually encounter a boundary.

Program Format

1. Introduction of presenter(s) and overview of topic (2 mins)
2. Icebreaker (3 mins)
3. Overview of the institution, the Office of Student Success, administrative structure, and funding (5 mins)
4. Overview of the theory and philosophy of strengths-based education (vs. deficit-based remediation) (5 mins)
5. Activity (10mins)
6. Presentation of initiative (involved parties, timeline, administration, funding, curriculum development) (15 mins)
7. Presentation of successes, challenges, and next steps (6 mins)
8. Public vs. Private perspective (4 mins)
9. Closing remarks and Q&A (10 mins)

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATION

A strengths perspective assumes that every individual has natural talents that can be strengthened to achieve success in many areas of life (Anderson, 2000; Saleebey, 2001) and is characterized by “efforts to label what is right” within people and organizations (Buckingham, 2007, p. 6). Research conducted by the Gallup Organization (Clifton & Harter, 2003) has led to the discovery that individuals who focus on their weaknesses and remediate them are only able to achieve average performance at best. However, they are able to gain far more, and even to reach levels of excellence, when they expend comparable effort to build on their talents. The strengths philosophy explores ways to empower individuals to flourish rather than simply survive (Liesveld & Miller, 2005).

Strengths-based education uses students’ talents as the basis for their academic and social engagement (Anderson & McGuire, 1997). It is based on the assumption that students have talents that they bring to the academic environment. These talents, defined as “naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied” (Clifton & Harter, 2003, p. 111), may include ways of processing information, interacting with people, perceiving the world, or navigating the environment. When combined with knowledge and skills acquired in the learning process, talents can be developed into strengths. Thus, a strength is “the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity” (Clifton & Anderson, 2002, p. 8).

In interviews with over 2 million people in a variety of professions across the world, Clifton and Harter (2003) found three consistent characteristics of high achievers: They spend most of their time in their areas of strength; they focus on developing and applying their strengths while managing their weaknesses; they do not necessarily have more talents than other people, but they have developed their capabilities more fully and have learned to apply them to new situations. In many cases, these high achievers invent ways of capitalizing on their strengths as they approach unfamiliar or challenging tasks (Clifton & Anderson, 2002).

Baumgardner's (1990, p. 1070) research demonstrates that knowing oneself leads to a sense of control and positive emotions that are essential to psychological well-being. In her broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, Fredrickson (2001, 2003) suggested that positive emotions broaden people's modes of thinking and action, which over time builds their enduring personal and social resources (2003, p. 163).

Teaching students how to more effectively engage in their academics, student organizations, leadership roles, and relationships through a positive understanding of self, has the potential to significantly impact student persistence and success.