Weaving Strengths-Based Approaches into Existing First-Year Curricula: A Lesson for Faculty Development

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Before we jump in …

In pairs…

Spend a few minutes each describing:

What do you love about your work?

Just think about…

What if every student could experience that same feeling on your campus?

What if students experienced that same fulfillment of being at their best *while learning*?

Becoming The Best Version of Yourself

Rather than sending the message that there is one path to success, a strengths-based approach encourages students to become the "best version of themselves" in order to succeed in academics and in life.

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

Strengths:
Not Just 'What You're Good At'!

Strengths lead to success, but they also

- Energize you – they "strengthen" you

- Fulfill a need within you

- Create positive emotions which open up the channels for learning and complex problem solving

- Lead to greater investment of time and effort because they are self-reinforcing

Strength =

(Talent + Energy) x (Knowledge + Skill)

Start with Talent

… a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied.

--Clifton & Harter, 2003

Ways of processing information

Ways of interacting with people

Ways of seeing the world

Habits, behaviors, or beliefs that lead to greater effectiveness

Methods to Identify Talent

- Questions to ask students:
  - What did you learn with the greatest ease in high school?
  - What did your teachers compliment you about?
  - What do your friends say they like best about you?
  - What was your favorite assignment?
  - What subjects do you enjoy studying the most?
  - What fascinates you?
  - Tell me about a time in your life when you accomplished something you were proud of.

- Previous successes, things that seem to come naturally, learning that occurs with little effort – all are indicators of talents that can be developed into strengths

- Instruments specifically designed to measure talents

The *Clifton StrengthsFinder*™

- Online instrument that identifies your greatest areas of talent: www.strengthsquest.com

- Identifies 5 signature themes of talent

- Validated on national sample of college students, with good test-retest reliability as well
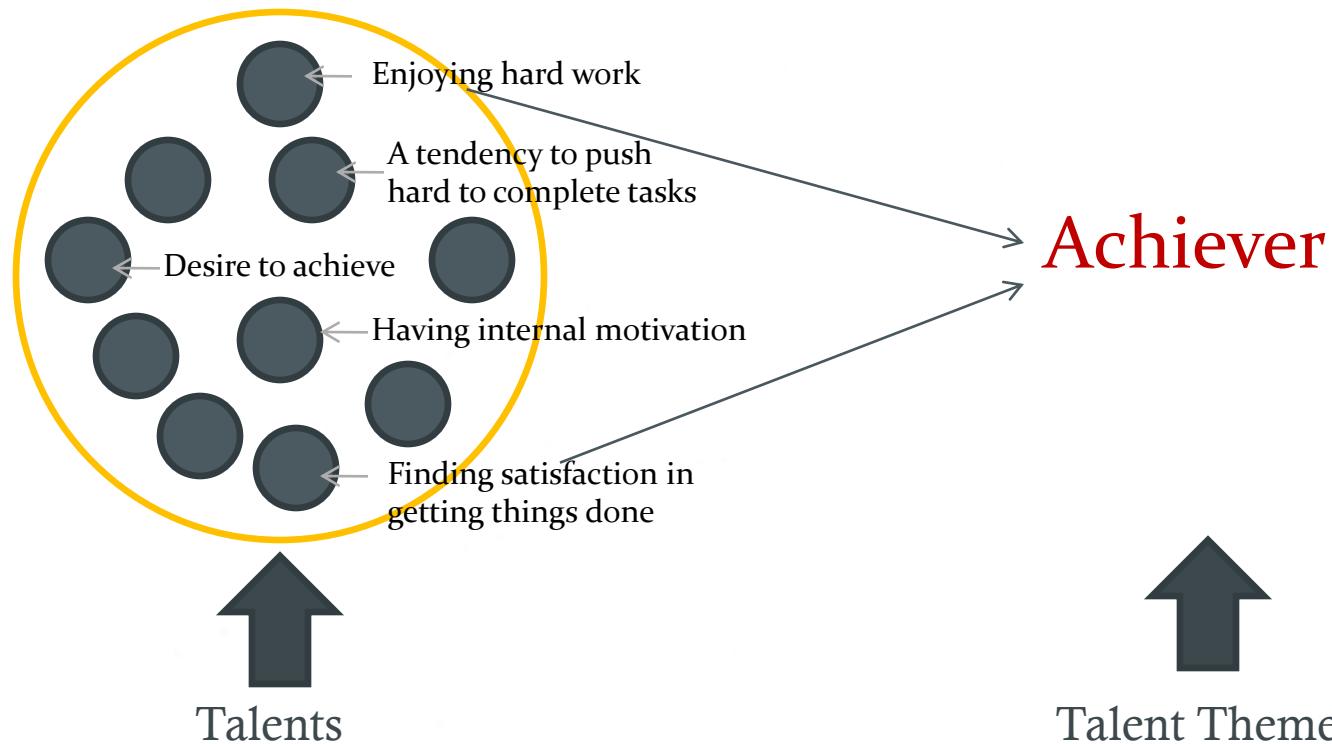
- Used by almost 300,000 college students to date

Outcomes from Using an Instrument to Identify Talents

- Provides a common language to talk about talents

- Validates and affirms students' experiences

- Jumpstarts the conversation and provides a springboard for discussion

The Clifton StrengthsFinder Measures Themes of Greatest Talent

A talent theme is a group of similar talents

Enjoying hard work

A tendency to push hard to complete tasks

Desire to achieve

Having internal motivation

Finding satisfaction in getting things done

Achiever

Talents

Talent Theme

How does a talent become a strength?

Talent x Investment = Strength

Predisposition   Requires Effort   Developed

Investment is a MULTIPLIER of talent!

Investment includes time spent practicing, developing skills, & building knowledge

Louis, 2008

Develop Strengths

By refining our dominant talents with skill and knowledge, we can create strength: the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity.

--Clifton & Harter, 2003

It's all about strengths *development*!

The Basics of Strengths Development Programs

- **Identification** of talents

- **Affirmation** and ownership of those talents

- **Envisioning** the self one wants to become

- **Planning** for that future and **developing** strengths (multiplying talents with skills and knowledge)

- **Applying** talents and strengths to new situations as well as to challenges

Important Aspects That Few Do

- How my talent themes affect others

- How to work with others on teams

- How to capitalize on my talents in specific situations

- Strengths approaches woven into existing best practices and content

- Multiple "touches" – and longer-term follow-up

How Strengths Development Programs Affect Student Success

- Strengths awareness → strategies for success within them→*perceived academic control* and *academic self-efficacy*

- The specific strengths → pathways for achieving their goals → *hope*

- Strengths development → *growth mindset* that emphasizes the important role of investing effort

- Connect strengths with who they are and how they learn →*motivation* and *engaged learning*

- Learn others' strengths → *psychological sense of community*

A Shift in Perspective

FROM

TO

Who you are and where you've been

Target the weakness and fix it

Failure prevention

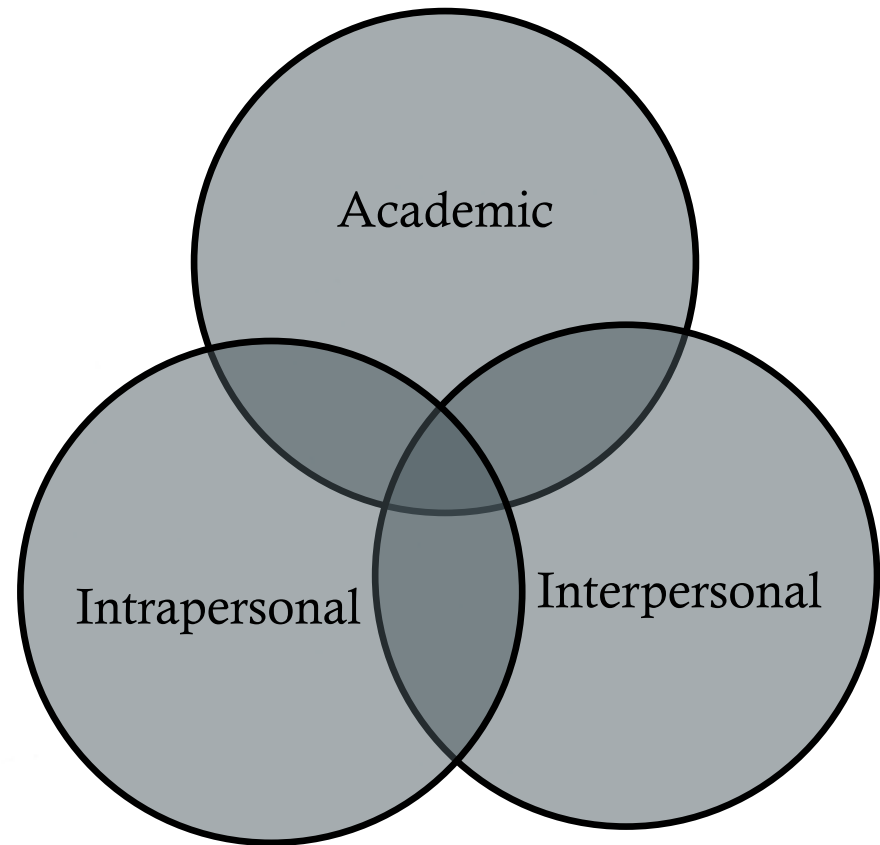**Surviving**

Who you can become and where you're going

Target the talent and build on it

Success promotion

Thriving

THRIVING

Academic

Intrapersonal

Interpersonal

Five Factors of Thriving

ACADEMICALLY:

- **Engaged Learning**
  - Meaningful processing, focused attention, active participation in the learning process
- **Academic Determination**
  - Self-regulated learning, effort, coping skills, goal-directedness (hope)

INTERPERSONALLY:

- **Diverse Citizenship**
  - Making a contribution, appreciation of differences, growth mindset
- **Social Connectedness**
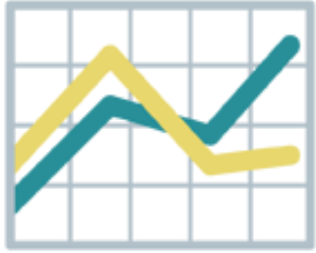 - Positive relationships and access to friendships

INTRAPERSONALLY:

- **Positive Perspective**
  - Optimism and subjective well-being

Our Hypothesis

A strengths development approach may significantly improve student thriving and success (GPA and retention)
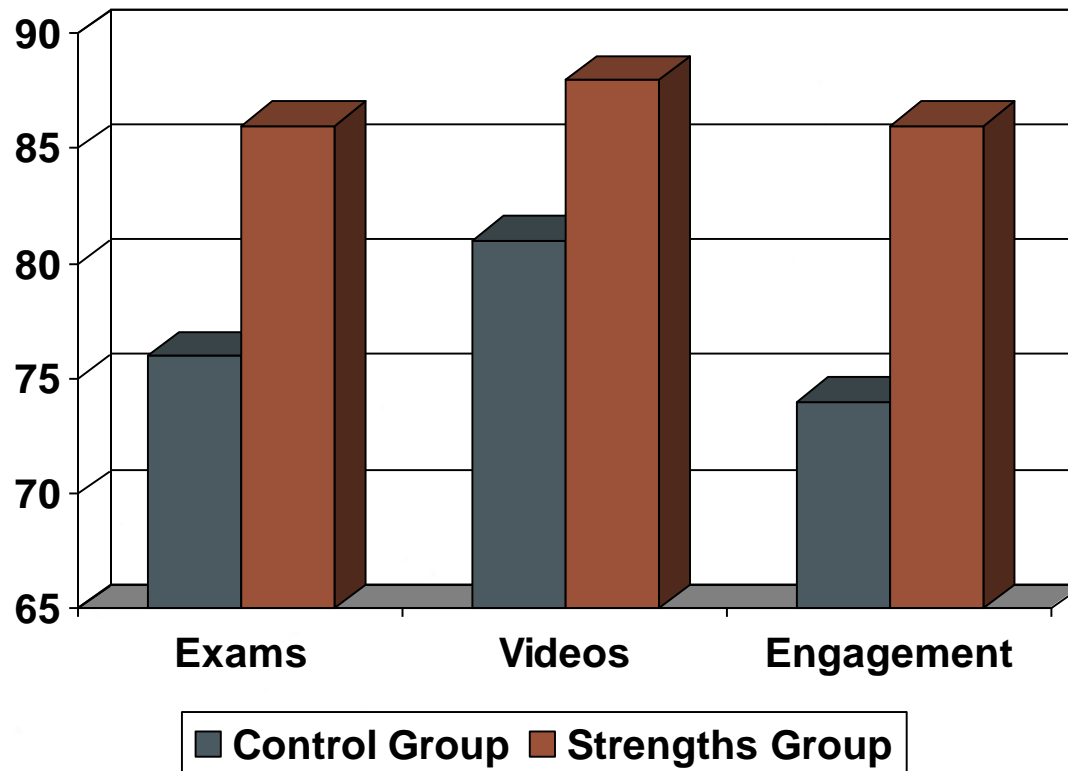
Strengths Development Studies

- Have typically focused on discrete "strengths" sessions – usually 4 – rather than weaving the philosophy throughout existing curricula

- Significant results include
  - Higher levels of perceived academic control
  - Higher academic self-efficacy
  - Higher sense of community
  - Greater intent to re-enroll
  - Greater student satisfaction with the course and the total college experience

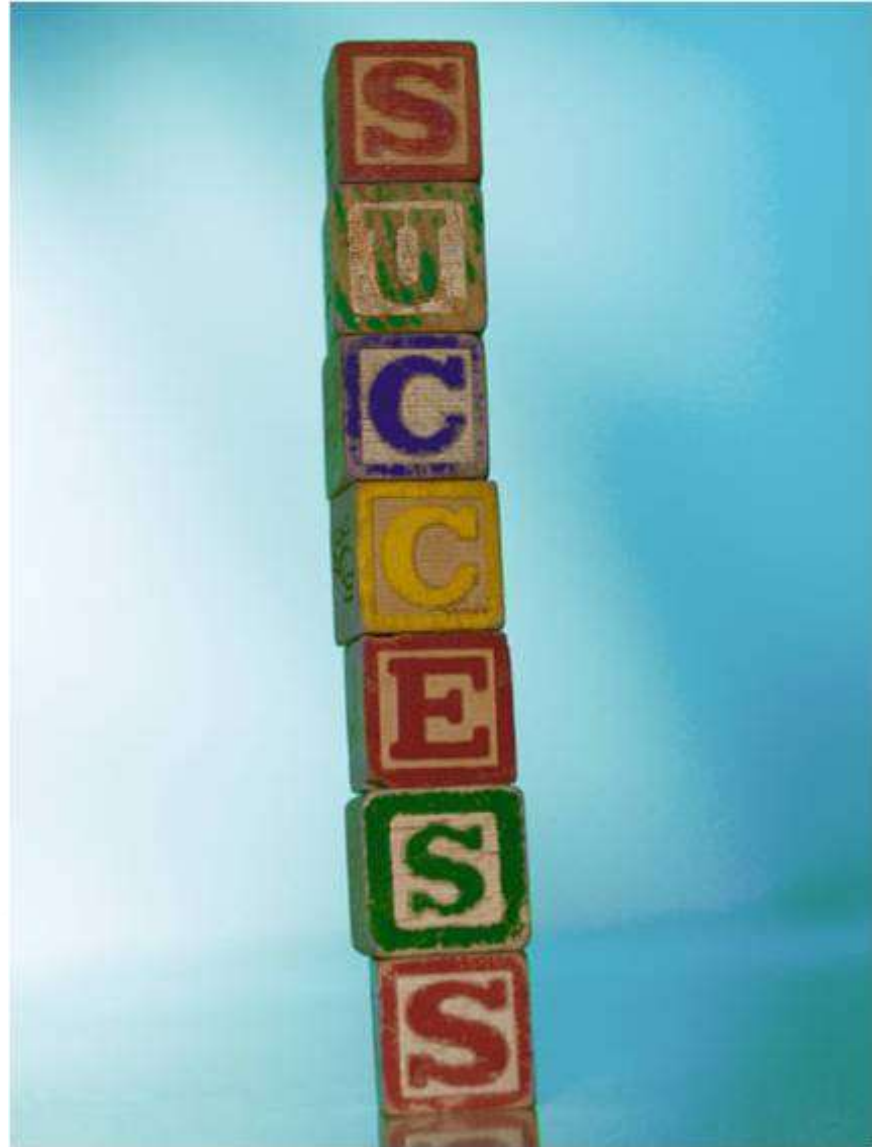# One Previous "Weaving" Study – Cantwell, 2005

The Challenge

Many FYE programs and faculty already have curricula and do not want to replace it with strengths development sessions
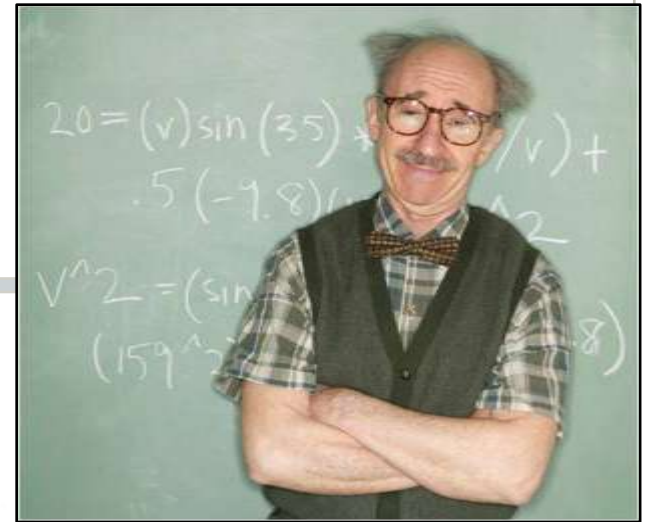
Faculty are often concerned about their expertise to deliver a strengths-based curricula

Faculty development is a key component to success

Do You Have to Be an Expert?

Faculty concern about knowledge and familiarity with 34 themes

Your goals:

- to understand your own strengths well enough to
  - Give examples of how you use your strengths to achieve and learn
  - Be a role model to students of someone who capitalizes on their strengths
- to encourage students to **develop** their talents by investing energy and acquiring skills

To Use an Instrument or Not?

Instrument

- Can easily and quickly identify strengths as an out-of-class assignment

- Results are valid and reliable

- Students use profile results in and out of class

- Time taken in class to discuss the themes

- Instructor may feel uncomfortable with lack of expertise related to the instrument

No instrument

- Identification requires interviews or other exercises in or out of class

- Results are not necessarily valid or reliable

- No profile results – focus is on dialogue and story

- Time needed in class to hear stories and to dialogue

- Instructor does not need to know anything about an instrument or specific terminology

Weaving a Strengths Development Philosophy

Concepts to be Woven:

- Growth mindset (role of effort)

- Talent identification

- Strengths development

- Reframing – conflict resolution

- Envisioning -- future planning and goal-setting

- Problem-solving

- Teamwork

- Energy management

FYE Topics that Fit

- Academic success

- Career planning

- Goal-setting

- Relationships

- Diversity

- Community building

- Time management

Faculty Development

- Guidebook

- Training sessions

- Power Point slides to use in class (optional)

- Handouts for student activities and assignments out of class

- Readings

- Support throughout the semester: resources, contact person, faculty meetings in small groups

Activities for Strengths Awareness and Community Building

- Getting to Know Our Talent Themes (worksheet)

- Teamwork from a Strengths Perspective (worksheet)

- Leadership Talents (handout)

- Affirming Your Strengths (out-of-class assignment)

Activities to Introduce a Strengths Development Model

- Mindset Quiz and PPT Slides

- Strengths Development (worksheet)

- "Why Practice Makes Perfect" (reading)

The New View of Academic Success

Power point slides on engaged learning, brain plasticity, how our strengths affect our approach to learning

"Strengths for Academic Success" (worksheet and group activity)

"Brain Tips" (handout)

Activities for Diversity and Relationships

Power point slides on values, reframing, conflict resolution

Succeeding @ Relationships (worksheet and group activity on reframing)

Strengths Lenses (worksheet and group activity)

Goal-Setting and Career Planning Activities

Youtube – Steve Jobs' commencement address at Stanford

Living Your Dream (mental imagery and worksheet)

Power point slides on SMART goal-setting

"Organizing Principles for Strengths-Based Career Planning" (handout)

"Your Greatest Successes as Clues to Your Career" (worksheet)

Results from a Pilot Study

- 8 sections strengths-based, 8 control, but no random assignment

- 124 students in the strengths-based sections, 131 in the control sections

- Students completed pretest and posttest measures of thriving

- Faculty volunteers were asked to utilize at least 4 strengths-based activities/assignments throughout the course, woven into their existing curricula

- Choices of topics included (percent who used a strengths approach to this topic)
  - Academic success (100%)
  - Career planning (85%)
  - Community building (75%)
  - Time management (75%)
  - Teamwork (75%)
  - Organization skills (60%)
 - Relationships (60%)

Limitations of the Design

- No random assignment to condition

- Faculty volunteers – more administrators in the strengths sections, more tenured faculty in the control sections

- Limited training provided after the semester had started

- Disproportionate number of students of color in the strengths sections

- Disproportionate number of low achieving students (based on high school grades) in strengths sections

Student Results
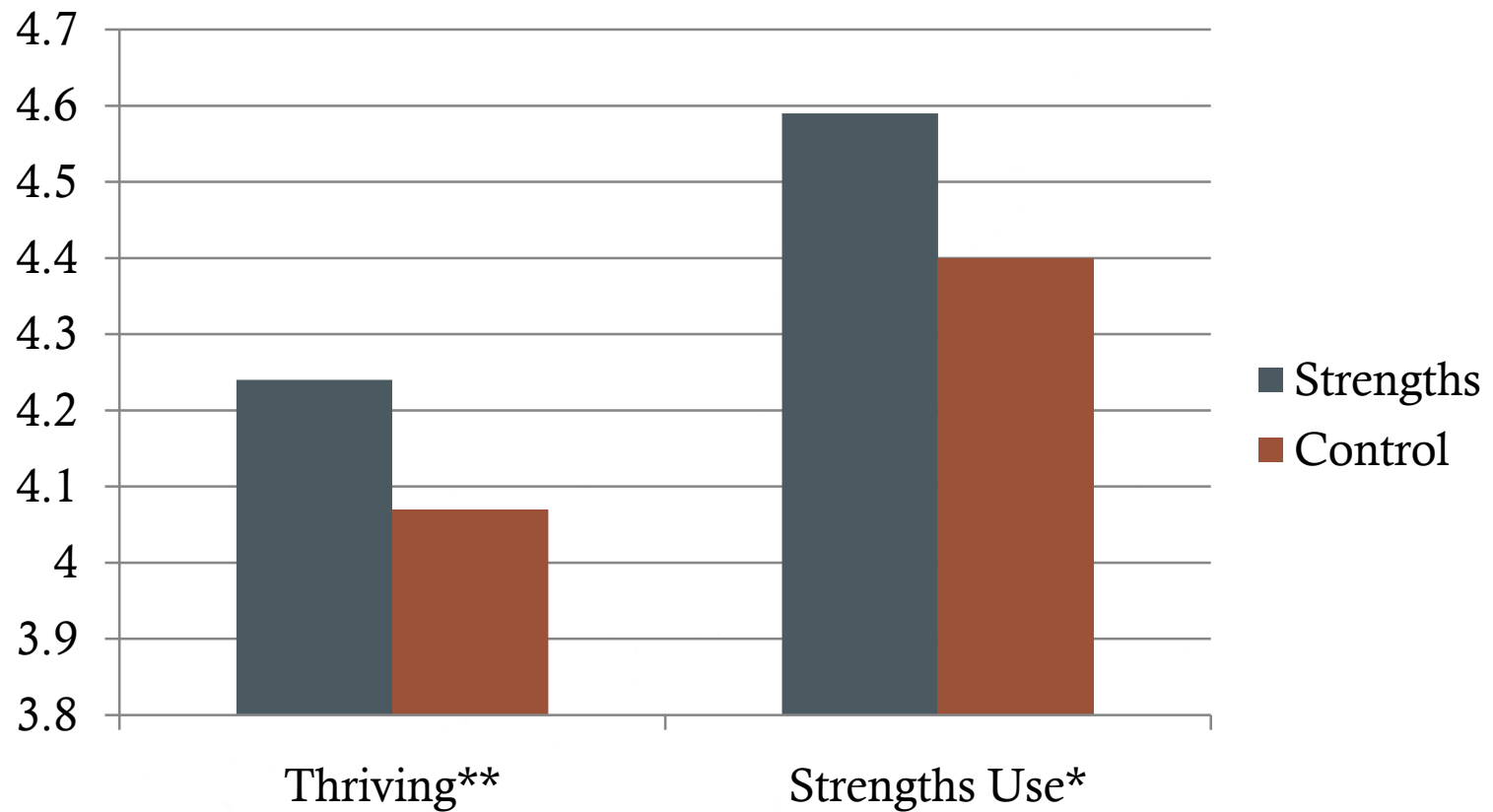
MANCOVA using pretest scores and high school grades as covariates

More Student Results

- The strengths sections had higher scores than the control sections on 20 of the items

- Academic Determination was the aspect of thriving most significantly affected

- No differences in intent to re-enroll

- Significant racial differences in pretest and posttest thriving scores

- After controlling for high school grades, three key areas appear to be impacted most by the strengths development approach:
  - Self-regulated learning
  - Perceived academic control
  - Recognition of the role of effort in academic performance

- Students of color did not evidence the same effects Anglo students did as a result of the strengths-based approach

Students of Color
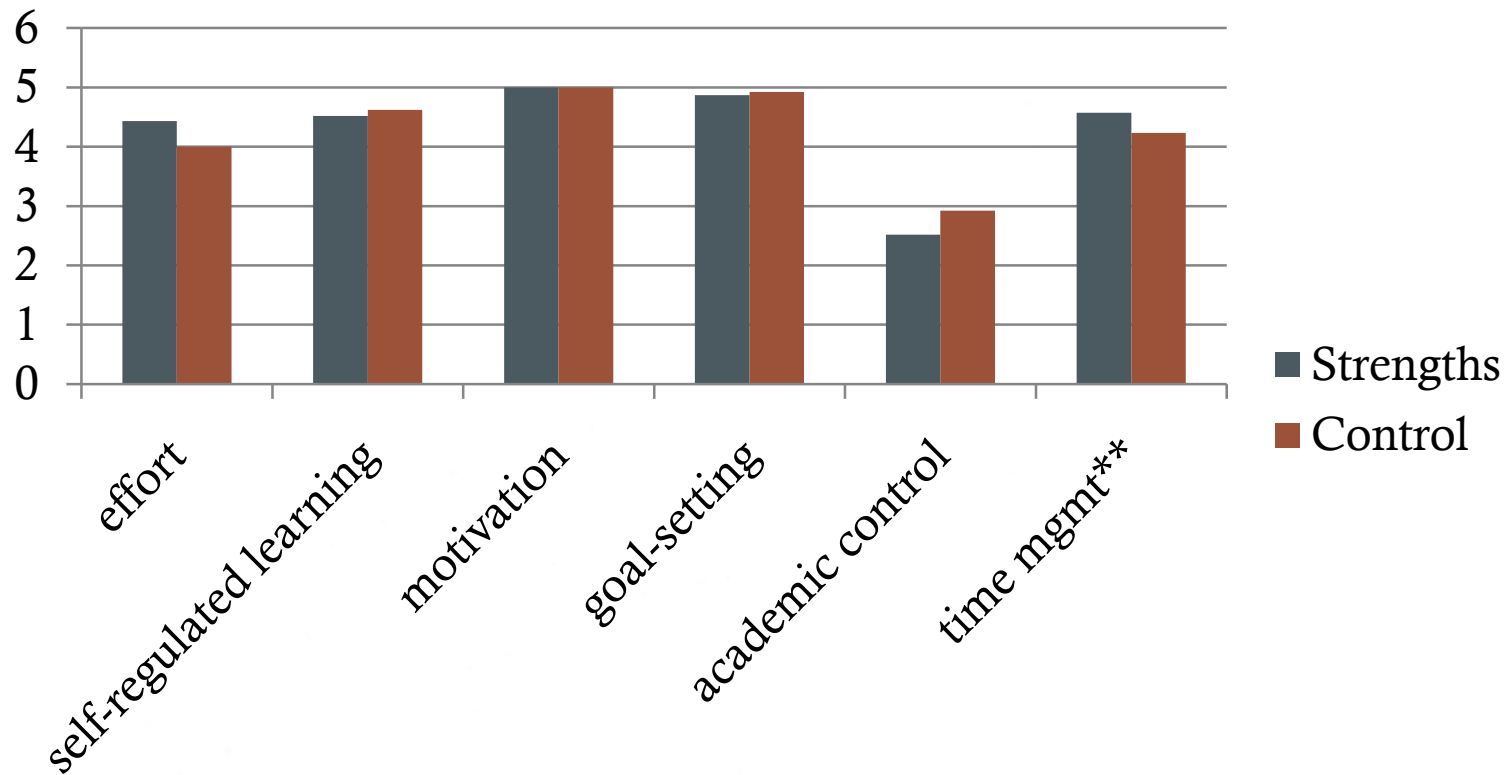
Faculty Feedback

Comfort Level on a 4-point scale
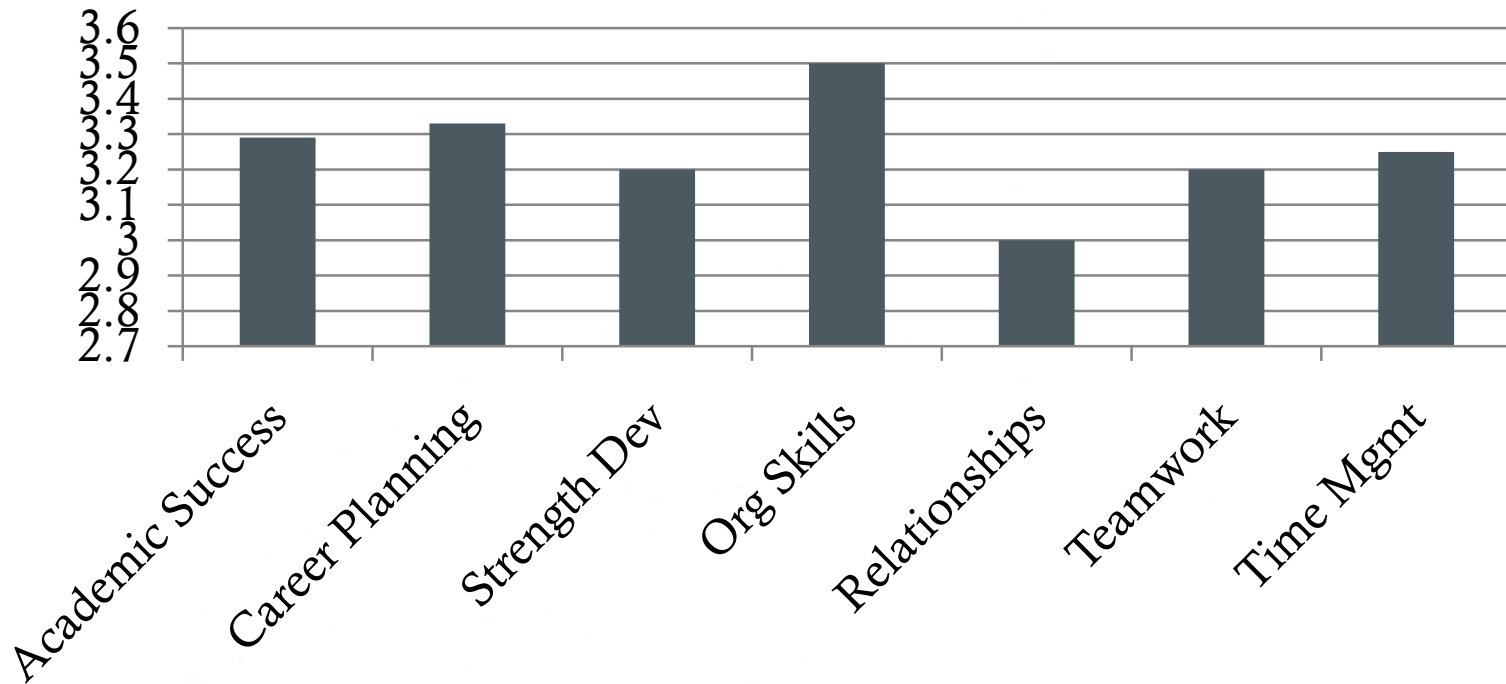
Voices of Faculty

The Importance of Faculty Development

- Basic human needs for competence, autonomy, and relatedness
  - Faculty need to feel knowledgeable, free to design their curricula in a manner that fits them, and supported by others

- Faculty feedback indicated that they needed more:
  - Discussion sessions with other faculty
  - Training specific to the use of the instrument and model

Implications for Practice

Any new approach to FYE needs faculty support for it to work – and faculty support is more likely when

- There is evidence that the approach positively impacts student outcomes they care about
- They have an opportunity to choose whether to adopt the new approach or not
- They have the freedom to incorporate the aspects they like and make it fit their own style
- They have support from other faculty as well as from experts in the approach

Final Thought

Strengths-based teaching is an approach that capitalizes on the instructor's strengths and deliberately connects students' strengths to strategies for mastering the course content, so that students are more motivated and engaged in the course.

The content of the course does not change substantively, but the instructor's approach to the students changes dramatically.

For More Information

For a copy of the Faculty Development Guide and student activities/handouts:

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