

Academic Advising for Student Retention and Persistence

A Strengths Development Approach

Webinar Handout

Presenter:

Laurie Schreiner, Ph.D.
Professor and Chair of Doctoral Higher Education
Azusa Pacific University
lschreiner@apu.edu

Pre- or Post-Webcast Activity Suggestions**Possible Selves Exercise: The Roadmap**

This activity will be discussed during the broadcast, and if possible, Webinar participants are encouraged to spend a few minutes considering the possibilities for their own lives.

Think about your life as a journey. Draw a road map of your future—and put a fork in the road.

- **Upper fork:** your “best possible selves” if everything in life went well and you accomplished all your goals.
- **Lower fork:** your “most feared selves” if life does not go as planned—what are you afraid of becoming?

Discussion Questions for Implementing Strengths-Based Advising on Your Campus

After the webinar, the following questions could be utilized to begin a discussion with your advisors and/or academic leadership on campus about the steps toward implementing this approach on your own campus.

1. How is a strengths-based approach to advising different from how advising is typically conducted on your campus?
2. What would it look like to incorporate a strengths-based approach into your current advising system?
3. What (if anything) would need to change about the way you currently organize and implement advising on your campus, if you wanted to focus more on your students' strengths?
4. What benefits do you see from shifting to a strengths philosophy? Which types of students do you think would benefit most from this? What would it take to implement this approach with those groups?
5. What kinds of additional information would you need about your students in order to implement strengths-based advising?
6. What support is necessary for your advisors if you shift to this approach?
7. What are the challenges of moving to this approach? What strengths do you have in your academic leadership team to address these challenges?
8. What kind of training would your advisors need? How would you provide this?
9. How do you help advisors view advising as more than course selection?
10. What is the first step you would need to take if you wanted to make a paradigm shift to strengths-based advising?

Strengths-Based Advising

Key Learning Points

1. Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience (Light, 2001). It is at the heart of all our efforts to educate and retain students (Tinto, 1998).
2. At its best, advising is a relationship that enables students to get the most from their college experiences.
3. The best advisors are those who see advising as integral to student success and view their own role as student advocate and guide. They like students, know how to connect with them, and realize that each student is unique. They believe that all students can learn under the right conditions.
4. The greatest impact from advising occurs when advisors are knowledgeable, accessible, and concerned and when advising is planning-centered, goal-directed, and strengths-based.
5. A strengths philosophy recognizes the talents that students bring with them into the learning environment and helps students further develop and apply those talents to new challenges.
6. Talents are ways of seeing the world and interacting with it that can be productively applied (Clifton & Harter, 2003).
7. When appropriate knowledge and skills are added to natural talents, strengths can be developed. Knowledge and skills have a multiplier effect on talents; talents do not become strengths without an investment of effort to gain knowledge and skills (Louis, 2008).
8. Healthy, caring relationships facilitate the development of strengths (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006).
9. The purpose of strengths-based advising is to tap into student motivation in order to engage students in their own learning, so that they can achieve their potential and experience success.
10. A strengths-based approach to advising promotes student achievement because it (a) builds self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation, (b) generates positive emotions that enhance students' problem-solving and capacity for creativity, and (c) develops a wider repertoire of success strategies and coping skills (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).
11. The steps of strengths-based advising include:
 - a. **Identify** students' talents.
 - b. **Affirm** their talents and increase their awareness of how their talents can be developed into strengths.
 - c. **Envision** a future by discussing their aspirations and how their strengths can help them reach their goals.
 - d. **Plan** specific steps that students can take to meet their goals.
 - e. **Apply** their strengths to challenges they face. Help students identify the skills and knowledge they need to add to their natural talents in order to develop strengths (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).

Strengths-Based Advising Sessions

Goals for the First Session:

1. To build a positive relationship with the student and discuss what the advising relationship is all about.
2. To introduce the student to the strengths philosophy.
3. To explore the student's strengths and goals for their college experience.
4. To discuss their academic plan and determine courses that are an appropriate fit.

Advisor's Role:

1. To set appropriate and realistic expectations for the advising relationship and for the college experience in general.
2. To explain to the student the importance of advising and what it means for the advisor to take a strengths-based approach.
3. To learn about the student's background, prior learning experiences, prior successes, interests, and concerns about college.
4. To be prepared to answer questions about the college experience and resources available.
5. To paint a big picture about the college experience and curriculum while at the same time helping the student make sense of how majors, courses, and co-curricular involvement fit into that overall picture.

Questions that may be helpful in meeting these goals:

1. Tell me a little bit about how you decided to come to this college. What are you looking forward to the most about being here?

2. When you heard you were supposed to meet with your advisor, what did you think that would involve? What do you think an advisor is supposed to do? Why do you think this college assigns students to advisors?
3. What would you like to have happen as a result of this advising relationship? How do you think I can be of the most help to you?
4. What kinds of things interest you most right now—what things can you do for hours at a time or go out of your way to make time for?
5. What kind of experiences have you had in your prior schooling?
 - a. What was high school like for you? (best part/worst part)
 - b. What were your favorite courses or types of assignments? What was it about these that made them enjoyable to you? (connect to particular courses in college that may also bring out their best)
 - c. What kinds of teachers did you find you connected best with? How would you describe what they did that helped you learn?
 - d. Tell me about one of your successes in high school. Where have you experienced success? (connect that to college resources, activities, and experiences where they could continue to experience that type of success)
6. Why did you think it was important to go to college? Has a college education always been part of your dream?
7. How does your family feel about your decision to go to this college?
8. What do you want to be able to do as a result of going to college? Where do you see yourself after graduating from this place? What type of majors have you considered in order to prepare yourself for doing that?
9. Describe for me what a “good day” is like for you. What kinds of things do you do or what kind of people are you with when you are having a good day?
10. How about a bad day—what kinds of things happen on those days? What are the kinds of experiences you want to avoid at all costs?
11. What kinds of things come easily to you? (not necessarily academic, but help the student connect those talents to academic situations)
12. What kinds of challenges or concerns do you have about being in college? When you have faced challenges like this before in your life, how have you handled them?

Questions for Each Phase of Strengths-Based Advising

STEP 1: Identify students' talents.

1. What did you learn with the greatest ease in high school?
2. What was your favorite assignment?
3. What subjects do you enjoy studying the most?
4. What did your teachers compliment you about?
5. What do your friends say they like best about you?
6. What fascinates you?
7. Tell me about a time in your life when you accomplished something you were proud of.
8. What can you do for hours on end?
9. If money were no object and you knew you could not fail, what would you love to do?
10. Tell me about a time recently when you were “in the zone” – you were thoroughly enjoying yourself and doing something well.
11. Think about what you are like when you are at your best. What would I see if I were watching you “at your best”?
12. Tell me about a really good day you’ve had recently. What made that such a good day? How did you make that day “good”?
13. Tell me about a challenge you’ve experienced in your life that you have overcome. What did you do to overcome that challenge? How did you do it?
14. What do you think are specific things you have done so far in your life that got you to college?
15. What brings out your best? As you think about a time when you did something well, what were the ingredients of that success? What kind of environment and what kind of people tend to bring out the best in you?

STEP 2: Affirm their talents and increase their awareness of how their talents can develop into strengths.

1. Which of your strengths do you feel you rely on most to be successful?
2. What strengths are most characteristic of you? Give me an example of a time when you used one of these strengths.

3. Talk to three people who know you well—how do they see your strengths operating in your daily life or in your interactions with them?
4. Which of your strengths do you think will be most useful to you in succeeding academically? Relationally? In your career?
5. What have you sometimes been teased about or even criticized for? How could this be a “shadow side” of something that is actually a strength in you that helps you achieve excellence? What would it take for others to perceive it as a strength rather than as a problem?

STEP 3: Envision a future by discussing their aspirations and how their strengths can help them reach their goals.

1. What are you most looking forward to while in college?
2. Imagine yourself graduating from college. What do you see yourself doing as a result of being a college graduate?
3. Where do you want to be five years from now?
4. How would you describe the person you want to become? What is that person like? What is that person able to do? What kind of relationships does that person have? What will it take for you to grow toward becoming that person?
5. What strengths do you think are your biggest asset? What skills and knowledge do you need to add to that natural talent in order to develop it into consistently excellent performance?
6. How can you capitalize on your strengths to become the person you want to be in 5 years?

STEP 4: Plan specific steps that students can take to meet their goals.

1. Select one aspect of yourself that you would like to develop while you are in college—academic, interpersonal, physical, and/or spiritual. Select one that is personally meaningful and that is key to you becoming the person you want to be as a college graduate.
2. Hone that aspect of yourself so that it is a SMART goal—specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely. For instance, an aspect of yourself that you want to develop may be that you want to be a good leader so you can get a job in management in a corporation. Translate this into a “smart” goal:
 - a. Specific—“a good leader” isn’t very specific. “I want to become someone that is able to positively influence the people with whom I work” is more specific, and “I will take a Public Speaking course so that I learn effective communication skills” is even more specific.
 - b. Measurable—what does it mean to positively influence someone? Define it in terms that you can see and measure. For instance, “I will take a Public Speaking course and ask my professor and peers in the class for feedback on my communication skills.”
 - c. Attainable—the goal needs to be under your control and able to be attained by you, regardless of what others around you do. For instance, “I will have a good relationship with my peers” isn’t completely under your control. But “I will ask my peers for feedback” is.
 - d. Realistic—your goal needs to be something you can accomplish as a college student with your particular constellation of talents. “I will get a job as the president of a corporation when I graduate” isn’t realistic. But “I will apply to at least five companies for management training opportunities” is.
 - e. Timely—your goal needs to be something you can accomplish while you are in college—and the shorter the time frame, the easier it is to stay motivated! “I will graduate with honors” may be a long-term goal, but “I will turn in all my assignments early this semester so I can get feedback and then revise them” is an intermediate step toward the long-term goal that may keep you more motivated this semester!
3. What strengths do you have that can help you progress toward your goal? How can you capitalize on those strengths?
4. What could keep you from accomplishing your goal? What obstacles may get in the way? How can you use your strengths to overcome those obstacles?
5. What campus resources or people in your life can help you reach your goal? What campus organizations would help you most?

STEP 5: Apply their strengths to challenges they face. Help students identify the skills and knowledge they need to add to their natural talents in order to develop strengths.

Course Selection

- What kinds of courses do you tend to do well in or enjoy most?
- What courses sound most interesting to you? Which of these meet graduation or major requirements?

- What kinds of things do you need to learn in order to be successful in meeting your life goals? What skills and knowledge do you need to add to the talents you already have?
- What other demands do you have this term—sports, family, work, and other obligations that will affect your commitment to classes? How do these courses fit with your other obligations?
- What courses are most likely to play to your strengths?

Career Planning

- What are some past jobs or hobbies or volunteer opportunities you have had that were especially enjoyable to you? What made this experience so enjoyable?
- What kind of environment tends to bring out your best? Describe this in as much detail as possible.
- Who do you admire or want to be like? What is it about this person that you admire most? What do they do that you would like to do?
- Given your strengths, what approach might work best to find out the types of careers that would be a good fit for you? (Example: not everyone enjoys taking interest inventories, but that could be a good suggestion for someone whose strengths include curiosity about themselves.)

Academic Struggles

- What are some academic tasks that you do well or that come easily for you?
- What strengths are you using when you are engaging in these tasks?
- How could you use those same strengths when you are struggling with an academic task?

Adjustment Difficulties

- When have you experienced loneliness/homesickness/conflict before in your life?
- What did you do in those situations that seemed to help you?
- What aspects of your strengths have you used in these situations that might be helpful this time?

References and Recommended Resources

- Clifton, D., Anderson, E., & Schreiner, L. (2006). *StrengthsQuest: Discover and develop your strengths in academics, career, and beyond, 2nd ed.* Princeton, NJ: The Gallup Press.
- Clifton, D. O., & Harter, J. K. (2003). Strengths investment. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship* (pp. 111-121). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.
- Light, R. J. (2001). *Making the most of college: Students speak their minds.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Louis, M. C. (2008). *A comparative analysis of the effectiveness of strengths-based curricula in promoting first-year college student success.* ProQuest Dissertations and Theses, Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com/docview/304817222?accountid=8459>
- Schreiner, L., & Anderson, E. (2005). Strengths-based advising: A new lens for higher education. *NACADA Journal*, 25(2), 20-29.
- Tinto, V. (1998). Colleges as communities: Taking research on student persistence seriously. *The Review of Higher Education*, 21(2), 167-177.

Instruments to Identify Strengths

Clifton StrengthsFinder: www.strengthsquest.com

This instrument conceptualizes strengths from a competence perspective and identifies talents as habits, behaviors, and ways of seeing the world that can be productively applied. There is a section focused on college students on the website, supplemental materials for use in advising and classroom sessions, and a textbook for students.

Values in Action (VIA) Inventory of Strengths: www.viacharacter.org

This instrument conceptualizes strengths from a character perspective and identifies signature areas of character that can lead to healthier relationships and greater psychological well-being. A number of exercises are available on the website, although not specifically designed for college students.

Advising Strategies for Course Selection on the Basis of *StrengthsFinder*® Themes

© Laurie A. Schreiner & Edward C. Anderson, Azusa Pacific University
Noel Academy for Strengths-Based Leadership and Education

Achiever – loves to be challenged – prefers challenging classes that are “doable” – likes profs that have a reputation for stretching students—“tough but fair” – encourage them to choose classes that may be unfamiliar to them and will challenge them

Activator – loves to learn by doing – courses with hands-on activities, lots of class participation, experiential learning – avoid classes that are all lecture or with a rigid syllabus – find profs that allow optional assignments

Adaptability – loves flexibility -- needs to explore lots of options before choosing a major – work hard to help the student see how various course choices could be used to fit any major or to meet graduation requirements – flexibility is the key! – these students will tend to add/drop more than the usual student, so allow them to register for more courses than they intend to take, knowing they will drop the ones that don’t interest them – remind them of the drop/add deadline

Analytical – loves to think critically -- needs to respect the expert – put them in courses where the professor is a noted authority, or is known for presenting information in a logical, credible manner – this student is often critical, especially of disorganized instructors – help them choose organized, coherent profs that encourage critical thinking – encourage them to take some of the “hard sciences” each term – this student is also often a sequential learner who wants things laid out for them step-by-step – this is the student who will appreciate creating an “action plan” or a 4-year graduation plan with the advisor!

Arranger – loves to design their own educational plan – this student likes the challenge of creating their own major or mapping out their own courses and may need little help from an advisor to do that – provide the needed information, then get out of their way! – this is the student who will thrive in independent study courses, who probably would enjoy study abroad or taking courses from other universities – this is also an ideal Teaching Assistant for professors

Belief – loves to see the value in a course – this student has strong values/beliefs that guide their choices, so their course selection needs to be congruent with their values or passions – may prefer profs with strong beliefs that are the same as theirs – may enjoy ethics courses, philosophy, religion, but also may be a handful for the prof – encourage them to take courses from profs with strong opinions and beliefs, regardless of whether or not they agree with those beliefs

Command – loves to make their own decisions – wants to plan their own curriculum, but for different reasons than the arranger (arranger wants to do it for the enjoyment of playing around with all the schedules and options; command wants to do it so they are in control of their own choices) – has a somewhat combative learning style, so would enjoy profs with strong opinions that encourage debate in the classroom – help them weigh the pros and cons of various courses or majors, then get out of their way so they can make their own decision – focus on decision-making skills with them and never give advice!

Communication – loves to tell their story – prefers courses where there is a lot of class participation – likes profs who tell stories or use narrative in teaching and who allow students to do likewise – choose courses where they will be graded for their class participation or where they can make oral presentations – theatre or communications courses will probably be of interest

Competition – loves to be the best – this student enjoys courses where they are compared to others – grading on the curve, posting grades by ID, or otherwise letting students know where they stand in comparison to others in the class appeals to them – may enjoy speech classes, classes where they can debate, or courses where they can rack up extra credit points – will want to choose courses where they can not only be successful, but be at the top of the class— especially if it’s a difficult class

Connectedness – loves to see the connections between courses – interdisciplinary courses will appeal, as will courses where connections are made with other courses in the curriculum – show them the connections between the Core or Gen Ed curriculum -- tends to enjoy humanities, history, philosophy, theology, psychology, and other courses where the “why” questions are asked

Consistency – loves fairness – prefers courses where expectations are clear and spelled out in advance – loves grading rubrics – dislikes being in courses where the prof plays favorites or where expectations change during the term –

surprises are no fun to these students, so they will want to map out their educational plan well in advance and then stick to it – enjoys routines, processes, and other sequential procedures, so may enjoy the sciences, statistics, accounting, music, engineering or law

Context – loves to know the background – enjoys courses that use primary sources, original texts or artifacts – enjoys history, political science, comparative religion, philosophy, economics, and other courses that allow them to investigate the “root causes” of today’s events – dislikes courses that involve rote memorization

Deliberative – loves to think it through – this student wants to know all the options and have all the information in hand before making a decision – will probably be well-prepared for the advising session and will appreciate an advisor who is well-informed and fairly directive – likes to know that the advisor can be trusted – will want to double check everything and will be concerned about meeting requirements – prefers courses where the expectations are clear, where class time is used well, and where students take the course seriously – encourage them to get copies of syllabi before choosing their courses, so there will be no surprises

Developer – loves to encourage others – this student thrives in courses where they can assist other students, work in teams, do group projects, or tutor – they enjoy service learning courses immensely – supplemental instruction, field studies, or being a peer leader in a course also appeal to them – an educational plan that includes these elements each term will be particularly satisfying to them

Discipline – loves organization – this student will also be well-prepared for the advising session and usually knows what they want – enjoys structured courses, well-organized profs with clear expectations, grading rubrics – will probably want to take all the required courses first to “get them out of the way” – will want to carefully plan their course schedule and will care about the times classes are taught and how they will get their assignments done – will want study time in between classes, so won’t want to schedule any back-to-back classes – will enjoy seeing the syllabus in advance of choosing the class

Empathy – loves to understand how others feel – enjoys courses where the professor relates well to students and forms connections to them – tends to enjoy psychology, social work, education, and other disciplines that encourage empathy – courses where they can read novels, watch movies, or journal are often a good match – the relationship with the professor is important to these students and they will care if that is a good fit

Focus – loves to reach their destination – often has powerful and specific goals – tends to enjoy courses that are practical in nature or have practical value to them – will ask questions of how a course will prepare them for life or will help them reach their goal – can concentrate for long periods of time and often has very effective study habits, so can undertake challenging courses if they see a practical result of taking the course – prefers profs who stay on track and don’t ramble – probably will have their classes mapped out in advance but may have questions about why they have to take certain courses

Futuristic – loves to have a vision – probably will enjoy the advising relationship as they ask questions of “what if” and map out various strategies with the advisor – enjoy challenging classes and profs with a reputation for risk-taking – probably can tell the advisor where they want to be in 5 years, but may need help figuring out how to get there

Harmony – loves consensus – likes courses that are practical in nature, dislikes courses where there are debates and where controversy is encouraged – tends to enjoy the advising relationship and tends to see the advisor as an expert guide, so these students may stop in more frequently for advising – likes to gather people’s opinions before making a decision – good listeners who don’t often contribute their own opinion, but are good at helping people hear each other’s opinions and what they have in common – may not let you know if they disagree with you, which makes advising a little tricky

Ideation – loves ideas and the big picture – enjoys creating their own educational plan – likes independent study or designing their own assignments – enjoys doing research with professors – enjoys courses that involve creative assignments rather than exams – enjoys profs with diverse ideas, enjoys learning from other students and hearing their ideas – willing to try anything that sounds interesting – may need advisor’s help to stay on track to meet graduation requirements because every class sounds interesting to them

Includer – loves to involve everyone – likes courses where there is diversity and lots of class participation – involvement in class is important to them – sociology, anthropology, psychology, social work and other social sciences probably will interest them – service learning will also appeal

Individualization – loves the uniqueness of others – will enjoy reading about people and studying different cultures – appreciates profs that value diversity and allow students to design their own assignments – will not want to be treated as a “typical” student but will expect the advisor to appreciate their uniqueness and help them plan courses that are especially suited to their learning style or other needs – will enjoy courses with lots of class discussion where they can learn from others – tends to enjoy literature, sociology, psychology, and other courses about people

Input – loves information – will want every possible piece of information you can give them as an advisor – will probably have read all the student handbooks and catalog information in advance of the appointment -- will enjoy classes in which research is valued – will enjoy profs who are “experts” or are well-read – class discussions, lots of reading, and use of the internet or library are appealing – doing research with faculty may appeal

Intellection – loves to think – enjoys classes where their thinking is stimulated – intellectual, analytical courses may appeal – enjoy writing papers, reading a lot – philosophy, theology, literature may appeal – may not always respond right away because they need time to reflect – may go away from the advising session to think, then come back with questions or new ideas

Learner – loves the process of learning – honors classes will appeal, as will courses that challenge and stretch – will want to take classes that are interesting to them and may not care as much about meeting requirements – enjoy working with faculty or doing research with faculty – enjoys class discussions

Maximizer – loves strengths and excellence – likes courses taught by profs whose teaching style matches their learning style – enjoys elective courses where they can develop new talents and strengths – likes to mentor or tutor others – enjoys working with faculty and tends to seek out mentors to learn from

Positivity – loves enthusiasm – likes courses that are fun – appreciates profs with a sense of humor – needs to make work fun – likes class participation and group projects – likes profs who praise them and are optimistic

Relator – loves to work with close friends – who teaches the class is more important than what is taught – relationships with profs matter – enjoys taking classes with friends – sense of community in the classroom is important to them

Responsibility – loves to see things through to completion – will want to take required courses first – will want to know what is expected in each class – likes profs who are consistent and can be trusted – enjoys having a faculty mentor – will usually be prepared for advising sessions and will follow through on educational plans

Restorative – loves to solve problems – case studies, problem solving exercises, and other class activities that allow them to come up with “solutions” will appeal to them – appreciates feedback from profs – always wants to know how something can be done better or how they can improve – may enjoy political science, sociology, or psychology

Self-Assurance – loves to be right – very confident of themselves and their abilities without necessarily being arrogant – important for them to be in control of their grades and achievement, so will want a prof who uses grading rubrics or has clear expectations – enjoys getting to know the prof and understanding what is expected – enjoys challenging and stimulating classes

Significance – loves to make a difference – enjoys class participation – enjoys classes where they can be successful – prefers classes that are relevant to their goals and desires – enjoys independent study or creating their own assignments – appreciates feedback from profs

Strategic – loves to see the alternative – likes classes that emphasize options, alternative solutions, and strategic thinking – independent study often appeals, as do creative assignments

Woo – loves to meet new people – enjoys taking a variety of classes – enjoys new material and opportunities to meet people they wouldn’t otherwise meet – relationship with prof is important – group projects usually appeal