

What is Strengths-Based Education?

A Tentative Answer by Someone Who Strives to Be a Strengths-Based Educator?

Edward “Chip” Anderson
Professor, Doctoral Studies in Educational Leadership
Azusa Pacific University

I. A Quick Answer to the Question.

Strengths-based education involves a process of assessing, teaching, and designing experiential learning activities to help students identify their greatest talents, and to then develop and apply strengths based on those talents in the process of learning, intellectual development, and academic achievement to levels of personal excellence.

The process of strengths-based education involves educators intentionally and systematically discovering their own talents and developing and applying strengths as they work to remain current in their fields, to improve their teaching methods, to design and implement their curriculum, and to establish programmatic activities to help students discover their talents and develop and apply strengths while learning substantive knowledge, acquiring academic skills, developing thinking and problem-solving skills, and demonstrating their learning's in educational settings to levels of excellence.

In essence, strengths-based education involves educators discovering their own talents and developing and applying strengths as they help students do the same in learning and completing academic tasks to optimal levels of personal excellence.

II. Understanding Talents and Strengths

A. What is a talent?

A talent is a naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied, such as the inner drive to compete, sensitivity to the needs of others, and the tendency to be outgoing at social gatherings. Although talents cannot be acquired, we each have talents that naturally exist within us -- and because those talents represent the best of our natural selves, they are the crucial component of strengths and our best opportunities to perform at levels of excellence.

Each and every person has talents. Our most dominant talents provide our greatest opportunity for achieving to levels of excellence.

B. What is strength?

A **strength** is the ability to consistently perform a specific task at a nearly perfect level, such as the ability to accurately transcribe verbal survey responses under tight deadlines.

C. How can talents be transformed into strengths?

In essence, a strength is composed of one's talents related to a specific task, which are refined through the acquisition of skills and knowledge related to that task.

- **Skills** are your basic abilities to perform the steps of specific tasks, such as the ability to operate a computer. Skills do not naturally exist within us; they must be acquired through training and practice.
- **Knowledge**, of course, is what you know, including facts (factual knowledge) and understandings (gained through experience) that can be productively applied to specific tasks. Knowledge does not naturally exist within us; it must be acquired.

The process of transforming talents into strengths is a learning process and thus should be considered a primary educational goal.

D. What specific qualities are considered talents?

1. Behavior patterns that make you effective.
2. Thought patterns that make you efficient.
3. Beliefs that empower you to succeed.
4. Attitudes that sustain your efforts toward achievement and excellence.
5. Motivations that propel you to take action and maintain the energy needed to achieve.

E. How Does the Concept of Strengths Differ From Other Concepts or Measures of Ability?

1. The concept of strengths is based in each individual's unique nature and building upon what he or she naturally does best. Traditional concepts and measures of ability (e.g., IQ and aptitude testing) are more global and are not designed to explain what a person can specifically do.
2. The concept of strengths goes far beyond traditional academic skills, ACT/SAT test scores, reading, math skills and composition skills because it identifies the person's naturally dominant patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior that can be productively applied. On the other hand, strengths are needed and can be applied to academic tasks.
3. The concept of strengths goes beyond musical, athletic, and artistic talents, yet strengths can be applied in each of these domains.

4. The concept of strengths begins with the realization that a variety of talents are needed to do something very well. It is unlikely that talents from only one theme will produce excellence. Often, a wide range of many talents, highly developed, all working together and strategically applied is needed to produce excellence.

F. The nature of strengths

1. The concept of strengths begins with talents.
2. Each person has a group of talents.
3. Talents form the basis for strengths.
4. Talents are like “diamonds in the rough,” whereas strengths are like diamonds that show brilliance after they have been carefully cut and polished.
5. Each person has a unique set and combination of talents that are developed and used to different degrees. This combination of talents makes each person like no other.
6. Each person is uniquely and profoundly talented!
7. A talent is an innate capacity for excellence.
8. Talents are the gateways to performance at levels of excellence.
9. A person’s potential for success is based in his/her talents.
10. While each person defines success for him/herself, achievement results from fully developing and applying strengths.
11. There are many themes of talent. The Gallup Organization identified more than 400.
12. Many tasks require talents from several themes, all-working together to produce excellence.

G. Dynamics of Strengths and Talent Development

1. Most people are not aware of their greatest talents because they are so “natural” to them.
2. Awareness and perception of talents may be limited due to limited or distorted feedback and/or negative, critical and judgmental relationships.
3. A person’s culture, and society in general, forms, limits, or deforms a person’s view of his/her talents.
4. Talents can become refined and more powerful with the acquisition of complementary skills and knowledge.
5. As long as a person has the appropriate talents --natural capacities -- effectiveness, efficiency and excellence can be achieved through strengths development.
6. Talents may either be developed or ignored. They may be rendered relatively useless if they are not developed and applied. Like a muscle, if used, talents become stronger!
7. One’s greatest talents represent the areas where he or she has the greatest potential for growth.
8. When fully developed and used through strengths, talents not only produce a person’s greatest success, but also produce a person’s greatest fulfillment.

9. Talent discovery and strengths development require practice, instruction, and affirming feedback.
10. Healthy, loving relationships are the best context for talent discovery and strengths development.
11. Most people enjoy the process of talent discovery and strengths development.
12. Talent discovery and strengths development have a motivating effect on a person and seem to generate hope and optimism about the future.
13. Talent discovery and strengths development take time and involve several steps and stages.

H. Steps to talent discovery and strengths development

1. Identifying Your Top Themes of Talent (Your Signature Themes), such as Achiever, Relator, Belief, etc.
2. Discovering Your Greatest Talents Within Your Top Themes, such as the tendency to take on challenges, comfort in making new acquaintances, a thirst for knowledge, etc.
3. Affirming Your Talents and Strengths – This isn't always easy because to us, our talents and strengths seem automatic or have been taken for granted.
4. Celebrating Your Talents – really feeling good about the talents and strengths you have. Having a sense of gratitude for your talents and strengths as opposed to wishing you had others. One way to gain this perspective is to think back over your life and identify peaks and valleys. Now think about your two deepest valleys and your two highest mountaintop experiences. Finally, think about how you got through those deep valleys. Can you see how your talents got you through? Do the same for the mountaintop experiences. Which of your talents helped produce the high points and which talents were revealed by the mountaintops?
5. Strengths Development. Training and education will help you develop strengths, but remember the following principles of strengths development:
 - a) Strengths development occurs most easily in the context of a trusted relationship where you express your intentions and progress in strengths development.
 - b) Strengths development is a focused, intentional process. Choose one strength you wish to develop, and get to work.
 - c) Strengths develop best when you apply your talents in as many settings as possible.

6. Reflecting on Your Talent Discovery and Strengths Development Experiences. Focused time spent thinking about your experiences in discovering your talents and developing strengths always enhances development.
7. Applying Your Strengths. This is the ultimate outcome. Know that for a strength to truly exist, it must exist in action. You must actively and fully apply your strengths in the area(s) where you want to achieve and reach levels of excellence. This is exactly what the “best of the best do.”
 - a) Be active, creative and inventive as you apply your strengths.
 - b) Don’t wait until your strengths are fully developed to begin applying them. In reality, applying strengths helps develop them.

III. The Enormous Implications of the Strengths-Based Approach to Students Achieving Excellence.

A. This is the message of the strengths-based approach to student success:

DO NOT TRY TO BE SOMEONE ELSE. STRIVE TO BE THE PERSON YOU REALLY ARE - - - FULLY AND COMPLETELY. THIS IS YOUR BEST AVENUE TO ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE.

EXCELLENCE IS AN EXPRESSION OF IDENTITY AND INTEGRITY.

1. Most instruction for achieving excellence sends the message: “You need to become someone else, act like this person or that person, and then you will achieve.” But the strengths-based approach says: “Be who you are to the maximum.”
2. Most instruction for achieving excellence says: “Fix this, fix that, overcome this weakness or that weakness and then you will achieve.” The strengths-based approach says: “Focus on strengths and manage your weaknesses.”
3. The sequence of a strengths-based educational programming:
 - a) First discover your talents.
 - b) Then develop and apply strengths in the areas where you have the greatest interest in achieving.
 - c) As appropriate, apply your talents to areas where you struggle -- the places that some people call weaknesses. Don’t focus on your weaknesses, but understand that you may have talents that can help in those areas. Then get back to fully developing strengths based on what you naturally do well.
 - d) Aligning your strengths, values, and beliefs toward important goals produces the power to make excellence a reality. This is why excellence is a reflection of identity and integrity!

IV. Comparing Different Programming Approaches to “Helping” Students.

The attached grid compares three programming approaches to “helping” students. These include (1) survival of the fittest, (2) deficit-based remediation and (3) strengths-based development and application. Reviewing these three programming approaches makes clear that the real programming differences are found between the deficit-based and the strengths-based approaches. Therefore the following outlines focus on these two approaches.

V. Why Deficit-Based Remediation Programming Interferes with Achievement and Excellence.

A. Negative Effects of Deficit-Based Remediation

1. Demoralizes students.
2. Reduces student motivation.
3. Reminds a student of past failures and frustrations.
4. Sets up negative expectancies in the minds of students.
5. Stigmatizes students.
6. Increases stereotyping / “stereotype threat.”
7. Destroys student confidence.
8. Lowers the expectations of faculty and staff towards the students.
9. Lowers the students’ aspirations to achieve and excel.
10. Provides no images or expectancies about being excellent.

B. Accumulative Effects of Deficit-Based Remedial Programming

1. Students become less involved in the campus community -- in part because they get the message that they don’t really belong!
2. Students go into a “survival” mentality and become defensive and suspicious.
3. Students invest less and less quality effort as they come to believe that they don’t have the ability to achieve and excel.
4. Staff and faculty invest less time and energy in students who are programmed for “deficit filling” and “remedial” programs because they assume that either the students shouldn’t have been admitted in the first place, or the students won’t succeed even if they invest time in them.
5. Students actively avoid and resist using the very services designed to help them. This leads to a “tug of war” where student success staff tries to find ways to manipulate and cajole students to use the services that are intended to help them.

VI. Implications of the Strengths-Based Approach for Educators.

A. Represents a very different way of:

1. Seeing students
2. Working with students
3. Developing programs for students
4. Providing services for students

B. Represents a very different way of:

1. Viewing yourself as a professional
2. Organizing your work
3. Working with yourself
4. Doing your work with students
5. Deciding how and where to invest your time and energy

VII. Gallup's Research on Excellence.

A. Major Findings from Studying the Best of the Best – Results of Studying Two Million People.

1. They are all alike in one respect: **They discover their greatest talents, and build lives of excellence through them!**
2. They focus on developing and applying strengths and managing their weaknesses.
3. **They invent ways to use their talents to make themselves effective.**

THE BEST OF THE BEST, THE TOP ACHIEVERS, CAPITALIZE ON THEIR TALENTS; THEN THEY BUILD THEIR LIVES THROUGH STRENGTHS.

B. Additional Conclusions Based on Gallup's Study of the Best of the Best.

1. Top achievers achieve highly because they more fully discover and maximize their greatest talents.
2. It is their greatest talents that enable top achievers to achieve so highly.
3. Top achievers find ways to apply their greatest talents to their achievement tasks.
4. Top achievers more fully discover their talents, and maximize them through the development and application of strengths.
5. Top achievers don't necessarily have more areas of great talent, but they do maximize their talents more fully.
6. Top achievers are top achievers because they choose roles and fields that permit and encourage them to develop and apply strengths.

C. New understandings since adopting a Strengths-Based Achievement to Excellence approach:

1. Our greatest area for growth is found in our greatest talents, not in our weaknesses.
2. Our greatest talents hold the key to excellence.

3. People are often unaware of their talents.
4. Some people have been hurt and put down for their talents and strengths by people who felt threatened by those abilities.
5. Some people have concluded that their talents are weaknesses because others have put them down or teased and made fun of them for the ways in which they naturally think, feel, and behave.
6. Some people are afraid that they have no real talents and are often defensive when you try to help them discover their talents.
7. When people have an opportunity to use their greatest talents, they are more motivated, they come alive, and they often report feeling more full and fulfilled as persons.

VIII. Strengths-Based Educational Programming: Preliminary Efforts and Results

A. The State of the Art in Strengths-Based Educational Programming

Organized efforts in strengths-based programming are less than five years old. These efforts differ incredibly. From institution to institution, differences include the instruments used to identify top themes, the types of themes that are identified, how students are made aware of their top themes and the talents within them, the amount of time devoted to increasing student awareness of their talents, and the amount of time devoted to encouraging students to develop and apply strengths. In some cases, strengths are addressed in a “one shot” intervention. In other cases, strengths are a part of an ongoing conversation through classes, workshops and/or advising sessions. There is no universally adopted approach.

B. Critical Factors to Recognize in Strengths-Based Educational Programming

1. Most students, staff and faculty are unaware of their greatest talents and some misperceive talents -- thinking they are weaknesses.
2. A relatively small fraction of students, faculty and staff do not want to learn about themselves or are defensive about their talents.
3. The settings in which students are made aware of their talents are very important.
4. The amount of time devoted to strengths-based programming is extremely important, and so is the timing during the educational experience.
5. The spacing of the time, the amount of time, and what is done needs to be very well thought out.

6. The support, “buy in” and enthusiasm of those conducting the strengths-based program and intervention is almost as critical as the approach being used.
7. Having practical activities to build student awareness of their talents and to help them develop and apply strengths is extremely important.
8. When academic advising focuses on identifying talents and strengths and uses them as a basis for educational planning, advisors and students each have a more positive and vibrant experience.
9. Recognize that developing strengths represents a type of learning that goes beyond what is typically expected in courses -- requiring more time, energy, intentional planning, thought, action and reflection than students might be used to investing.
10. Recognize that “strengths-based” is not merely a technique; it is a philosophy of life and lifestyle involving perceptions, attitudes, self-expectations, aspirations, approaches to learning, efforts to influence and modes of relating to others and to God that represents a significant departure from the way school is normally conducted.
11. Strengths-based educational programming forces some individuals to grapple with beliefs about who they are, *whose* they are, where their talents come from, the reason they have certain talents and what their talents enable them to do best.
12. Strengths-based educational programming confronts individuals with the challenge of being excellent and being persons of integrity by fully developing and applying strengths in a manner that is lived out consistently with their values and their sense of vocation and destiny.
13. Probably the best educational approach is to have a credit course in which the nature of strengths and strengths-based development is systematically studied and progressively applied to the tasks of identifying, affirming, celebrating, developing and applying strengths in academics, educational planning and career planning.
14. Strengths-based programming seems to work best when faculty and student affairs professionals work with peer counselors or peer teaching assistants to help new students become aware of their talents and then fully develop and apply strengths in each aspect of the educational experience.

C. Preliminary Results from Studies of Strengths-Based Educational Programs.

Most studies on strengths-based programming are self-reports. Within the next three years, more experimental studies will be completed. Nevertheless, what students are telling us is worth noting. Patterns of responses to open-ended questions and

“Likert” scales concerning the benefits and impacts of strengths-based programming are as follows.

1. Increased Awareness of Talents:

Know more of my talents.
Know more about my talents.
Understand myself better.
Thinking more about talents and strengths.
Focusing more on talents and strengths.
Talking more about talents and strengths.
Changing perceptions about self.
Things once saw as weaknesses – now see as talents and strengths.
Explains why I’ve succeeded.

2. Increased Personal Confidence

Knowing what I can do.
More confidence in what I can do.
More confidence in my abilities.
Recognizing how to be a leader based on talents and strengths.

3. Increased Academic Confidence

How to develop and apply strengths in study strategies
Have more good academic strategies.
Believe I will graduate.
Believe I will achieve.
More certain that college is right for me.
I can and will earn higher grades.
Looking at attitudes and study habits more positively.
Knowing better where I can excel.
Optimistic about academic careers.

4. Increased Motivation to Achieve:

More willing to work for goals.
Seeing how college fits future goals.
Realizing what does and doesn’t motivate you.
Building up courage.
Confidence-building motivation

5. Increased Confident About the Future:

More optimistic about the future.
Future plans and goals clearer.

Re-evaluated goals in light of talents and strengths.
Clearer about career direction
Realize I had more abilities than I thought.

6. Increased Use of Talents:

Applying talents in academics.
Using talents to be a better learner.
Using talents more and more often.
Applying talents to personal life.
Doing more of what I naturally do best.
Coping with difficulties based on talents.
Moving toward potential.
Changing behavior based on knowledge of talents.

7. Developing Strengths:

Understand the theory of strengths development
Have a plan for developing strengths
Feel responsible to maximize the talents I've been given.

8. Improved Interpersonal Understandings and Relationships

Thinking about others in terms of their talents and strengths
Desire to help others discover their talents and strengths.
Noticing talents and strengths in others.
Trying to relate to talents and strengths I see in others.
Telling others about their talents and strengths.
Recognizing that people have different talents and strengths.
Communicating with others better
Knowing better how to serve others.
Being more helpful.
Breaking stereotypes.
Building better friendships.
Becoming more compassionate.
Using strengths to help and serve others.

9. Other Impacts of Strengths Awareness:

Feeling proud of the person I am.
Valuing who I am as a person.
Greater peace of mind.
Becoming more authentic.

D. Next Steps in Strengths-Based Programming

1. Results from studies on the effects of strengths-based programming are positive, but they point to the need for more rigorous efforts in helping students discover their talents and develop and apply strengths.
2. Thought needs to be given to a more comprehensive, academically substantive approach to helping students develop and apply strengths.
3. Students are making the greatest connections between their talents and (a) learning and academics, (b) careers and (c) their relationships. Perhaps this should be the focus of a course of study involving systematic talent discovery and strengths development.
4. Few students seem to view their talents from a theological perspective -- even at Christian colleges and universities. Perhaps this should be a focus of direct instruction and perhaps strengths development efforts should be taught within the context of a ministry or theology course of study.

IX. Challenges in Implementing a Strengths-Based Approach to Promoting Student Success.

A. Student Resistance to Identifying their Talents and to Developing and Applying Strengths.

At first, I found it ironic that students were resistant to focusing on their talents. I couldn't understand why students would resist focusing on what they naturally do well as a viable means of promoting their success. Now I better understand why some students seem to "fight" this approach. My current understanding includes the following:

1. Honestly believing that the best way to improve is to work on their weaknesses rather than focus on their talents.
2. Being afraid that they don't really have any talents and being afraid that they will be exposed as "talentless."
3. Fears that if they did follow their talents, they would be thrown into conflict with certain authority figures. For example, when parents expect their children to enter certain fields or careers, but the offspring knows that his/her talents are in another area.
4. Fearing that focusing on strengths might lead to undesirable characteristics such as becoming proud, arrogant, pretentious, or lazy.
5. Some know what their greatest talents are, but they also know that those natural abilities sometimes threaten other people. And when these other people are threatened, they become antagonistic or rejecting.
6. Some people have been indoctrinated to believe that they are one big clump of defects and deficits with few, if any, talents and strengths. Therefore, they resist any attempt to call attention to themselves because they fear that what will primarily come to light are their weaknesses.

7. Some fear becoming aware of their strengths because they are afraid of overestimating their abilities -- coming to believe in their talents, and then finding out that their talents weren't that strong or important after all.
8. Some resist thinking about their talents because they don't think there is anything special about their abilities. This is common. When someone has particularly powerful talents in a certain area, he or she can do certain things with great ease. As a result, they assume that anyone can do what they can do. Consequently, they conclude that there is nothing special about them or their talents.

B. Staff and Faculty Resistance to a Strengths Approach to Promoting Student Success.

Some faculty and staff members resist a strengths-based approach to promoting student success because of the very same reasons that students may resist this approach. But their resistance extends beyond the students' resistance to include the following:

1. Some believe that schools and colleges are places where standards must be maintained. Therefore, anything that even hints of accommodating to who the students are as opposed to where the standard is, should be resisted and rejected. They fear that a strengths approach might result in "dumbing-down" the curriculum or reducing the credibility of the degree.
2. Some believe that identifying students' weaknesses is exactly what should happen. Their logic then states that students need to confront and work to overcome their weaknesses because this process is key to student development and this process builds character.
3. Others emphasize a process of identifying and remediating weaknesses because the students need to remediate their weaknesses in order to take required courses and more advanced classes.
4. Some reject a strengths-based approach because they believe the purpose of education in general is to "sort and sift" students in order to determine who is "fit" for advanced training in graduate and professional schools. Thus, they would argue that from a "survival of the fittest" standpoint, the most "humane" thing to do is to get rid of those who "aren't college material" as soon as possible.
5. Some resist a strengths-based approach because it is different, it may require them to do things differently, and perhaps work harder. (Honestly, it does take more work to find out what is right with people and to discover their abilities than it does to discern what is wrong with people and discover their weaknesses).
6. Sadly, some resist a strengths approach because they like the power that they think they have when they are able to point out students' needs, problems, weaknesses, defects and deficits. Some faculty and staff like to maintain an arrogant attitude that says "I'm better than you because I know what your weaknesses are." While none will admit it, just watch the pleasure that some get out of pointing out what students

can't do and the endless statements they like to make about what is wrong with students.

C. Institutional Resistance to a Strengths-Based Approach to Promoting Student Success -- Personas Reflections Regarding Higher Education.

If we are honest with one another, most colleges and universities do relatively little to promote the academic success and achievement of students.

While the foregoing statement may “ruffle some feathers,” just ask a few questions, look around, and observe what is really being done. Look and see just how serious an institution of higher education really is about student retention and student success. As you look around, ask yourself and others these types of questions:

- What additional efforts are being made to promote student persistence and achievement above and beyond what would normally go on?
- How much money is being spent on student recruitment versus student retention?
- Where in the organization do those in charge of “enrollment services/admissions report, versus those who are charged with retaining students?
- What is the status of those who teach “student success courses” versus those who teach other classes?
- If an institution wanted to improve its student success and retention, whom would they count on to promote student success and improve student retention? (Would it be orientation? Academic advising? Freshmen seminars? Special tutoring?) No matter who it may be, ask these people how special, how well funded, and how integral to the institution they are. And then ask how important they are made to feel?

It would seem logical for an institution to spend at least as much money retaining and promoting the success of its students as it does recruiting the students. What this would mean is that the average college would devote between \$1,000 and \$2,800 per student to designing and providing student retention and student success programs, services and classes.

Is there something wrong with my logic? After all, how much does an institution lose each time a student drops out or flunks out? And how much harder is it to recruit students when previous students go back home after they have negative experiences? How much smoother would things run if fewer new students left colleges? How much more balanced would class sizes be if there were roughly the same number of students in the freshman, sophomore, junior and senior year?

My point is that if colleges and universities made student success and retention their highest priority, I don't think there would be much resistance to a strengths-based approach to promoting achievement. All of this leads to one question: What is the highest priority of our colleges and universities? Or we might ask: “What are we trying to do?”

X. Goals and Outcomes of a Strengths-Based Education.

- A. Identification of each student's greatest talents.
- B. Development of strengths based on student talents.
- C. Students able to apply their talents and strengths in the following processes:
 - 1. Learning concepts, principles, theories, facts, and information.
 - 2. Developing intellectual reasoning and problem-solving abilities.
 - 3. Developing written and oral communication abilities.
 - 4. Achieving to levels of excellence in academic tasks.
- D. Students will employ their talents in the following:
 - 1. Overcoming disappointments and remaining motivated.
 - 2. Building and sustaining healthy relationships.
 - 3. Assuming and fulfilling leadership roles and functions.
 - 4. Being of service and helping others fulfill their potential.
 - 5. Identifying and pursuing a sense of meaning, destiny, mission, and vocation.
 - 6. Identifying and preparing for careers and professions that are an extension of their values and beliefs, a role in which they can fulfill their mission and sense of destiny, and a role in which they can regularly use their talents and strengths.
- E. Students will know how to use their talents in the process of normal living, adjusting, and problem solving.
- F. Students will know how to use their talents in the experience of loving God.
- G. Students will be able to identify talents and strengths in others, and provide encouragement and hope as they communicate to others the talents and strengths they see in them.

XI. Fundamental Assumptions and Presuppositions Regarding Strengths-Based Education.

- A. Each and every person has a unique combination of talents.
- B. Our particular combination of talents is what makes us unique individuals.
- C. Our talents are the embodiment of our potential.
- D. The key to achieving is found within a person's greatest talents.
- E. Achieving levels of excellence first requires the discovery of one's greatest talents and then requires the strategic development and application of strengths.

- F. Each student already has a group of talents before they enter our educational institutions and training programs.
- G. The talents within students form the basis for them to learn, achieve, and persist in school, college, and professional training.
- H. To the extent that students discover their greatest talents, then develop and apply strengths in learning and achievement tasks, they will be empowered to achieve.
- I. As students learn about their talents, they grow in confidence and become more willing to enter achievement activities. In essence, as students learn of their opportunity to develop and apply strengths, they become more “engaged” in the learning process.
- J. As students learn how to apply their talents to learning and achievement tasks, they not only become more confident to enter, but also to persist in achievement activities.
- K. To the extent that students do not learn how to identify their talents, and to develop and apply strengths, they will have less confidence and motivation to achieve and will become “disengaged” from the educational process.
- L. Most students are not aware of their greatest talents, much less how to build upon them to develop and apply strengths for consistent, near-perfect performance.
- M. The lack of student knowledge about their talents and the lack of student understanding about how to develop and apply strengths directly limits their achievements and literally prevents them from achieving to levels of excellence.
- N. For the foregoing reasons, the most important task in promoting student achievement involves:
 - 1. Helping students identify their greatest talents.
 - 2. Helping students develop strengths.
 - 3. Helping students learn how to apply their talents and strengths in learning and achievement tasks.
- O. The future achievements and the quality of life students experience will, in large measure, be determined by the extent to which they discover their greatest talents and whether they learn how to develop and apply strengths.
- P. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that we as educators, and that our educational institutions (from the most elementary to the most advanced graduate and professional programs), consider that our most critically important job is helping students discover talents and learn how to develop and apply strengths through the many courses, programs, services, and other opportunities we offer.

XII Roles and Functions of Strengths-Based Educators.

A. Strengths-based educators are leaders.

Strengths-Based Educators view their role and functions more in leadership terms than traditional views of “teachers” who “instruct,” “tell,” and “explain.”

The word “educate” is a leadership word. It literally means to draw out, bring forth, and to bring out. Accordingly, strengths-based educators draw out the talents that are already within students. They bring forth the talents and help students transform their talents into strengths. Then strengths-based educators draw out the best that is within students by helping them fully develop and apply strengths in thinking, learning, and achieving.

Leadership is an influence relationship between leaders and followers designed to produce real changes. Accordingly, strengths-based educators establish an influence relationship with students based upon the respect that educators have for their students and the respect that they have for the magnificent talents that are within their students, and their potential for strength. The “real changes” that strengths-based educators produce involves the identification of talents within their students and the development and application of strengths based on those talents. Finally, these educators produce real and lasting changes within students by focusing on enabling and empowering students to fully apply their talents and strengths in learning, academic achievement, and other areas of personal and academic development.

B. Strengths-based educators apply their own strengths and talents.

Strengths-Based Educators move to levels of excellence in their profession as they fully discover their own talents and develop and apply strengths in the process of educating their students and stimulating them to become independent, optimal, life-long learners.

More specifically, strengths-based educators employ their talents in the following aspects of their roles and functions:

1. Using their talents to continue learning and remaining current with the body of knowledge and cutting edge of knowledge in their field.
2. Using their talents to learn the most effective and efficient educational methods.
3. Employing their talents in curriculum planning.
4. Applying their talents in creating, developing, and designing class assignments, skills-building activities, and experiential learning opportunities.
5. Employing their talents in the process of assessing the strengths and talents of their students.
6. Applying their talents in building students’ awareness of their own talents.
7. Employing their talents in helping students learn how to discover their own talents, and to develop and apply strengths in learning and academic achievement.

8. Using their talents in the process of presenting course content and orchestrating learning activities inside and outside of class.
9. Applying their talents when addressing classroom disruptions and discipline cases.
10. Using their talents to evaluate students' academic assignments and establishing grades.
11. Employing their talents when consulting, advising, and mentoring students outside of class.
12. Using their talents when consulting and interacting with other "publics" involved in education and educational institutions -- such as parents, administrators, and community leaders.

XIII. Conclusion.

In essence, strengths-based education boils down to three groups of individuals making dynamic impacts by fully utilizing their greatest talents:

1. Teachers becoming strengths-based educators by discovering their greatest talents, and fully developing and applying strengths in drawing out and helping students identify their own talents, and develop and apply strengths of their own as they learn and achieve academically.
2. Students becoming strengths-based learners as a result of having their talent discovery and strengths development, and then learning how to apply their various strengths in the process of learning facts and other information; the process of acquiring academic abilities, communication abilities, and problem-solving abilities; and in the process of completing academic tasks at levels of personal excellence.
3. School and college administrators becoming strengths-based educational leaders who maximize their talents and strengths in the process of keeping student learning and academic achievement the primary focus of attention, hiring instructors based upon their talents and strengths to be true educators, supervising educators and other staff based upon their respective talents and strengths, and allocating resources based upon programmatic activities that can best help students identify their talents and develop and apply strengths.

Programming Approaches to “Helping” College Students

Name of Approach	Approach Methods	Outcomes Sought	Approach with New Students	Approach After Entry
Survival of the Fittest	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands off • Weed out those who can't or won't succeed as soon as possible • No remediation • High expectations • High entrance requirements 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rugged individuals • Independence • Competitive • Competent • High status of institution 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Explain requirements, expectations, policies and procedures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hands off
Deficit-Based Remediation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sensitivity to student needs, problems and concerns • Building programs and services to remediate student problems, defects and deficiencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase student persistence • Increase student achievement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Diagnose student defects, deficiencies, ignorances, needs, problems and concerns. • Immediately place students in classes and programs to remediate deficiencies. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Required participation in remedial programs based on diagnosis • Monitor for progress • Guide to available services • Set expectation that remediation will be completed by a certain time
Strengths-Based Development & Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Every students has talents through which he or she can achieve excellence • Student talents provide the basis for achievement • Students can be taught to apply talents to different areas a variety of strengths 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students maximize college experience & confidence • Students achieving to levels of excellence • Students fulfilling potential and destiny • Character development and personal development plus learning knowledge, skills and learning how to learn. • Personal integrity and excellence in academics, careers & service 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assess student strengths, talents, interests, & previous achievements. • Build student awareness of talents & potential for excellence • Guide students to courses and opportunities that capitalize on talents and build strengths • Train students in applying strengths to manage weaknesses 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor development of strengths and building on talents • Reinforce involvement around strengths & affirm progress • Stimulate the application of strengths to academics and areas of needed improvement • Inventing ways to apply developed strengths to academic, personal and career excellence • Applying strengths to help others achieve excellence & reinforce personal integrity.