

## STRENGTHS-BASED ADVISING

*Laurie A. Schreiner*

Two paradigms have dominated higher education since its inception almost a millennia ago. Until the 1960s, the dominant paradigm reflected a *survival of the fittest* mentality, in which only the brightest students were admitted and educators were charged with weeding out those incapable of stellar achievement. As increased access into colleges and universities within the United States became the norm in the early 1970s, the paradigm shifted toward one of *deficit remediation*. Under this later model, a wider variety of students were admitted and educators identified areas in which students were deficient and created an academic plan for remedial course work. Those advocating the deficit remediation approach believed that students are more likely to succeed if they spend most of their first year addressing areas of weakness (Schreiner, 2010).

Both modes of operations exist in the current higher education environment, but both fail to address a crucial element of student success: motivation. In this chapter, I present a new paradigm—strengths development—as a way of addressing the fundamental challenge of higher education: how to engage students in the learning process and motivate them to fulfill their potential.

Strengths-based advising represents a paradigm shift for higher education from failure prevention and a survival mentality to success promotion and a perspective of thriving. Rather than assessing the areas in which the student is deficient and in need of remediation, advisors using a strengths-based approach assess the talents and personal assets that students bring into the college environment and work with them to develop those competencies into strengths through gained knowledge and skills. Instead of focusing primarily on the problems students may be experiencing, advisors help students envision future possibilities and learn to leverage talents to address obstacles that may emerge in the future (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). In addition to a goal of completing college, strengths-based advisors help students make the most of the college experience.

In this chapter, I provide an overview of strengths-based advising and its theoretical foundations along with evidence of its effectiveness. I outline steps in the advising process along with questions advisors can ask and tools they can use during each step. Throughout the chapter, the practical applications of this advising approach are emphasized.

## Foundations of Strengths-Based Advising

The foundation for a strengths-based approach to advising contains interdisciplinary components. A strengths perspective has been evident within the field of social work for several decades. It is based on the assumption that clients possess the ability to overcome adversity, grow, and succeed (Saleebey, 1996, 2006; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989). Accounts of strengths-based development in business (Buckingham, 2007; Clifton & Harter, 2003; Hodges & Clifton, 2004; Rath & Conchie, 2008) illustrate another pillar of this approach. The business model utilizes feedback and awareness of talents in motivating people toward engagement and excellence, thus enabling companies to be more productive. Positive organizational scholarship, in the field of organizational development (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003), contributes an important perspective on thriving, vitality, and meaning.

The current emphasis on the psychology of human strengths evidenced in the positive psychology movement (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Shushok & Hulme, 2006) also provides a theoretical foundation for the strengths-based approach to advising. Positive psychology emphasizes optimal human functioning and features connections to intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000), self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), well-being (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008), and hope (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002).

Finally, the talent development approach used in higher education (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2005) also forms part of the interdisciplinary foundation for strengths-based advising. It emphasizes that every student can learn under the proper conditions of appropriate challenge and support. An institutional commitment to talent development thus “arranges resources and learning conditions to maximize student potential so that students leave college different in desired ways from how they started” (p. 77). This commitment is also reflected in the theory and practice of appreciative advising as described by Bloom, Hutson, and He (2008) (see also chapter 6 by these authors).

### The Strengths Development Philosophy

The bedrock under each interdisciplinary foundation of strengths-based advising rests on the premise that capitalizing on one’s areas of greatest talent likely leads to greater success than investing comparable time and effort to remediate areas of weakness (Clifton & Harter, 2003). Fredrickson (2009) expanded on this point by emphasizing that “people who have the opportunity every day to do what they do best—to act on their strengths—are far more likely to flourish” (p. 189).

Advisors taking a strengths-based approach use students’ talents, defined as “naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied” (Clifton & Harter, 2003, p. 111), as the bases for educational planning (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). These competencies include ways of processing infor-

mation, interacting with people, perceiving the world, and navigating the environment. When multiplied by the knowledge and skills acquired in the learning process, these talents can be developed into strengths: “the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity” (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006, p. 4). Buckingham (2007) and others (Linley, Willars, & Biswas-Diener, 2010) further suggested that strengths are not evidenced solely in performance, but also in energy: Strengths are those activities at which a person excels and that energize the person.

By emphasizing the talents students bring into the college environment, advisors can directly address the issue of student engagement in the learning process. As Ryan and Deci (2000) have established through their research, a sense of competence, involvement in supportive relationships, and freedom to choose activities contribute to intrinsic motivation. By identifying and nurturing students’ strengths as well as highlighting areas of existing competence, advisors in supportive relationships with students motivate them to become engaged in the learning process. They foster intrinsic motivation by helping students identify the many choices available for further developing their talents into strengths.

### **Evidence of Effectiveness**

Evidence of the effectiveness of strengths-based approaches exists within business, positive psychology, and higher education venues. For example, Harter and Schmidt (2002) demonstrated that employees whose supervisors have provided opportunities for them to capitalize on their strengths exhibit higher levels of engagement and greater productivity than do those where favorable conditions for growth are not consistently offered. Within the field of psychology, Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) conducted an intervention in which people were asked to think of a new way to use their signature strengths every day for one week. Employing a randomly assigned placebo as a control, they found those in the treatment group experienced significant increases in well-being and decreased depressive symptoms 6 months after the intervention. Among first-year students in higher education, similarly controlled empirical studies demonstrated that a strengths-development approach contributes significantly to a growth mind-set and greater feelings of control over one’s own academic success (Louis, 2011) as well as to greater levels of engaged learning, higher grades, and enhanced satisfaction with college (Cantwell, 2008).

In a random-assignment control-group study of advising, Schreiner (2004) compared a strengths- to a needs-based assessment approach. Students working with faculty practitioners using a strengths-based approach reported greater satisfaction with advising, greater benefit from the specific exercises used, and higher GPAs at the end of the semester and one year after the conclusion of the study than did those who received advising based on needs assessments. In addition, the strengths-based advising group experienced a freshman-to-sophomore persistence rate that was 12% higher than that of the needs assessment group, a statistically significant difference.

## Challenges

As noted by Schreiner and Anderson (2005), advising directors may encounter four challenges from advisors contesting the adoption of a strengths-based approach. First, advisors may resist a change in the status quo, which is a normal response, but advisors who support either a survival-of-the-fittest or deficit-remediation paradigm may exhibit particular reticence to change. Investing training time in a discussion of these models and providing evidence of the efficacy of a strengths-development approach, directors may open the minds of advisors trained in a different perspective. In response, some advisors may suggest that a strengths-based approach is too time consuming to be practicable. By emphasizing that all effective advising takes time and that the strengths-based approach replaces existing strategies with more effective ones, directors may alleviate concerns.

Second, some advisors lack confidence or expertise with the new instruments or strategies. Administrators can address their uncertainty by a) assuring advisors that they need not be experts on the instruments but simply prepare and ask questions that will help students independently discover their strengths and b) giving advisors the opportunity to learn about their own strengths and how to utilize them to become even better advisors.

Third, practitioners may consider talent identification the end goal, rather than focus on strengths development. Research indicates that simply helping students identify personal strengths may unintentionally send the message that individual success is dependent primarily on the presence of certain personal qualities rather than on the effort required to develop and use talents appropriately (Louis, 2011). Therefore, advisors need to frame strengths as individual predispositions that can be developed as opposed to innate characteristics that students possess. By making them aware of resources and opportunities available on and off campus for strength development, advisors assist students in cultivating their strengths and applying them to the tasks they face.

Fourth, some advisors will invoke myths about a strengths-development paradigm. Under the most pervasive of misperceptions, some believe that strengths-development strategies replace all strategies designed to address weaknesses. Faculty members who strongly believe that students should focus on their deficits may be particularly inclined to view a strengths-based advising approach as insufficient to address areas where students need improvement. However, the strengths-development approach does not ignore weaknesses; rather, through strengths-based advising students address weaknesses from a position of strength.

Both strength-based advocates and those opposed can agree that weakness is defined by characteristics that interfere with the success or performance of an individual or others in the environment (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Administrators can point out that such weaknesses can be addressed by helping students identify and use their strengths to improve in these areas. For example, a student who needs to improve reading comprehension and who possesses empathy can identify with the

characters in a story, visualizing the situation and feeling the emotions described, to better understand the author's point. By starting with the strength (in this case, empathy), the student gains motivation and confidence to address a challenge (reading). The specific strategies characteristic of a strength likely lead the student in the direction of success (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).

## Steps in Strengths-Based Advising

Five steps in strengths-based advising tend to work best in sequence. In this section, I describe the steps and the intended outcomes of each.

### Step 1: Identify Students' Talents

Strengths-based advising begins with an identification of students' talents. This process of discovery builds rapport with students as advisors focus on the individual and his or her potential contributions to the learning environment. Several methods may help advisors in this process. Although the use of a specific instrument is not necessary, many advisors find the concrete information available from a strengths assessment to be helpful. The assessment results allow advisors to initiate conversation with students; they also validate and affirm students' experiences and provide both student and advisor with a common language for talking about strengths.

This step of strengths-based advising builds positive emotions in students as they learn about aspects of themselves that can equip them for success in college as well as in their lives outside of college. These positive emotions, in turn, enhance students' problem-solving skills and creative thinking (Fredrickson, 2009).

### Step 2: Affirm Students' Talents and Increase Awareness of Strengths

After identifying students' talents, the advisor increases students' awareness and appreciation of those assets and helps them see how they can be further developed into strengths. Some students do not value their talents or show reluctance in acknowledging their capabilities because they consider such competencies unexceptional. Other students have been criticized for the unique aspects of their strengths: Gregarious individuals may have been labeled by teachers as troublemakers; women may have received negative feedback for being assertive or competitive; men may have been ridiculed for expressing empathy. Especially with those hesitant to embrace their talents, advisors need to help advisees see their talents as unique and affirm them as assets in building a foundation for college success. This critical affirmation process cues students to deploy their strengths as they face challenges or rebound from failures (Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993).

In addition to affirming their talents, advisors can help students learn how to develop positive habits into strengths. In the first step in the formula for success, the student identifies the talents and aspects of life that energize her or him and then

determines the level of effort needed to multiply aptitudes into strengths. Only when the dominant talents are refined and honed by the skills and knowledge students gain from the learning environment can strengths emerge. Recent research on brain plasticity, which describes how the human brain changes physically and chemically as a result of practice, supports the legitimacy of this description of success progression (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2008). The more a skill is practiced, the faster the neural pathways connect. Areas of the brain used during such practice become larger and more fully developed. This insight into the way the brain changes as a result of effort and practice can help students see that such effort enables them to develop strengths to succeed in college; thus, their academic success is under their control.

### Step 3: Envision the Future

After identifying students' talents and increasing their awareness of the ways they can be developed into strengths, advisors implement the third step of strengths-based advising by discussing with students their aspirations and how developing their talents can help them reach their goals. This step is not primarily about career planning or major selection, but about the kind of person a student wants to become. In this envisioning phase, self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation are generated by the process of articulating what Markus and Nurius (1986) call *possible selves*—those aspects of oneself that one most wants to embody in the future. Some students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, may express a highly motivating possible self in negative terms about an unwanted future; that is, they may disclose their biggest fears about a future self they want to interdict. Whether positive or negative, a concrete and vivid depiction of one's possible selves can encourage students to take specific steps in the present to create (or avoid) that future self.

This envisioning process creates an image of a bright future for students that helps them persevere during difficult times. Psychologists have demonstrated that visualizing one's best possible self leads to more positive emotions and higher levels of motivation that can motivate students to take action to reach valued goals (Cross & Markus, 1994). Pizzolato (2006) noted that utilizing the possible-selves approach may particularly benefit students historically underrepresented in higher education.

### Step 4: Plan Specific Steps for Students to Reach Goals

Designing a plan for reaching the student's goals constitutes the fourth step of strengths-based advising. Helping students connect their passions and strengths to their future selves often opens their minds to possibilities for academic majors and careers they had not previously considered (Bloom et al., 2008). In this step, the advisor focuses on cocreating a specific plan that a student can implement, with both short- and long-term goals important to the student and congruent with her or his values and strengths.

This step of strengths-based advising utilizes strategies that Lopez et al. (2004) labeled *hope building*. According to statistically significant findings in research, levels of hope in college students predict their grades as well as their persistence to graduation, even after the researchers controlled for preexisting levels of ability and demographic characteristics (Snyder, Shorey, Cheavens, Pulvers, Adams, & Wiklund, 2002). Building hope involves helping students a) identify an educational goal that is meaningful and realistically attainable for them, b) develop multiple pathways for reaching the goal, and c) brainstorm ways to handle obstacles and remain motivated in the face of challenges. The strengths that students have identified throughout the advising process become pathways to their chosen future selves. By providing the essential encouragement and support that can sustain the motivation necessary for reaching their goals, advisors can help students reframe potential obstacles to success as challenges to be overcome with effort (Schreiner, Hulme, Hetzel, & Lopez, 2009).

### **Step 5: Apply Students' Strengths to Challenges**

Teaching students to transfer strengths from one setting to another, such as from the playing field or the theater to the classroom, comprises a critical component of strengths-based advising (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). In the final step, advisors assist students in identifying ways to apply specific talents to new situations or challenges.

By reminding students that they have successfully dealt with challenges in the past, advisors not only offer encouragement but call to mind the specific ways students achieved past successes as well as energize and motivate them to tackle the current difficulty. Rather than communicating one strategy for success, advisors reveal that the secret to success lies in capitalizing on one's strengths as the best means for addressing and overcoming challenges.

## **The Skills and Tools of Strengths-Based Advisors**

The practice of strengths-based advising requires a set of tools, skills, and strategies that advisors can acquire through a variety of training opportunities. Strengths-based advising is primarily a philosophical approach, and although instruments may be helpful in the process, it does not require the use of specific measures. The three major tools advisors will need include a) methods for identifying and affirming students' talents, b) strategies for helping students envision and plan for their best possible future, and c) techniques to assist students in applying their talents and strengths to new situations and challenges.

### **Instruments and Methods for Identifying and Affirming Student Talents**

Identifying students' talents is at the heart of strengths-based advising because those aptitudes form the foundation for planning and success. An instrument to

identify talents can accelerate the conversation about strengths and provides advisors with hypotheses about students' talents that they can confirm in dialogue with the student. The results from such instruments can be affirming to students as external objective validation of the attributes they possess. In addition, assessing students' strengths as they enter college sends a powerful message about the priority the institution places on learning about students and the contributions they will make to the university environment. Kuh (2008) noted that this talent development philosophy grounds the advising practices in institutions where students are highly engaged.

Three instruments were designed specifically to identify talents and strengths and can be used in a higher education setting: *StrengthsFinder 2.0* (The Gallup Organization, 2007), the *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and *Realise2* (Centre for Applied Positive Psychology, 2010). Each instrument was created based on unique perspectives and for specific purposes. For example, *StrengthsFinder 2.0* measures strengths of competence and provides students with 5 signature themes of talent that can be used to succeed. It features 34 possible signature themes identified from a Gallup study of excellence and describes "areas where the greatest potential exists for strengths building" (Hodges & Clifton, 2004, p. 256). A web site designed for college students and educators (<http://www.strengthsquest.com>) provides a wealth of support materials as well as access to a textbook and to the instrument for a fee.

The *Values in Action Inventory of Strengths*, in contrast, measures strengths of character, providing students with five signature character strengths valued across cultures as elements of a well-lived life. Materials on its web site (<http://www.viacharacter.org>) are free and geared primarily to adults but could be adapted for use with college students. *Realise2* is a newer assessment from the United Kingdom that measures strengths based on responses to questions about the tasks that a person does well and that energize him or her. The assessment is available for a fee on the web site (<http://realise2.capeu.com/4/>), which outputs an in-depth profile and personal action plan guide.

Advisors may also choose to use instruments with which they are already familiar, such as the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator* (Myers & Briggs Foundation, 2003), the *DiSC* (Inscape Publishing, 2003), or the *College Student Inventory* (Stratil, 1988). In using these types of instruments, advisors emphasize the positive aspects of the results as the assets students can leverage or develop further for success.

Advisors who cannot access a particular instrument to identify strengths can ask students questions in the advising session that will enable them to discern their talents. For example, advisors can ask students about past accomplishments and explore with them the strategies that led to their successes in these previous situations. They can ask students about their most recent educational experiences (Hovland et al., 1997) or about the characteristics that students believe best describe them. The following advising questions allow advisors to probe for strengths:

- What did you learn with the greatest ease in high school?
- What have your teachers complimented you about most often?
- What was your favorite class in high school?
- What subjects did you enjoy studying the most?
- What can you do for hours on end?
- What fascinates you?
- What are you like when you are “at your best”?
- Tell me about a good day you have had recently; what made that such a good day?

Specific exercises advisors can use to affirm students’ strengths and raise their awareness of the talents they bring to the college environment are focused around targeted questions and homework tasks. Advisors can ask students the following questions:

- How have you used your talents to succeed in the past?
- In what settings or circumstances do you most often use these abilities?
- What brings out your best or helps you thrive in college?
- What strengths resonate most with you and how have you seen them in action?
- What have you sometimes been teased about or criticized for? How could this be a shadow side of a talent that helps you achieve excellence? What would it take for others to perceive it as a strength rather than as a problem?

As a task to complete outside the advising session, advisors can encourage students to confirm their strengths with the significant people in their lives, such as family and friends who know them well. Sometimes students are not accepting of their own strengths until others affirm them. Hearing stories from family members about early life experiences in which their strengths were evident conveys to students that the ingredients for success are already within them (Schreiner & Anderson, 2005).

### **Strategies for Envisioning and Planning**

The strategies for helping students envision and plan for a possible future include exercises for imagining possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and strategies for accentuating hope (Lopez et al., 2004). Questions advisors can ask to help students envision their future include the following:

- What are you most looking forward to while in college?
- What do you see yourself doing as a result of being a college graduate that you cannot do now?
- Where do you want to be five years from now?

- 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?

Advisors also can ask students what they have always wanted to do or what they would do “if money was not a concern and you knew you could not fail.” This approach is similar to Burg and Mayhall’s (2002) “miracle question” (p. 82) that leads students to explore possibilities they have not previously considered.

In addition to advising questions, two exercises help students imagine their possible selves. In the roadmap exercise, students think about their life as a journey and draw a road to their future that contains a fork in it. The upper fork represents their “best possible selves” if everything in life goes well and they accomplish all their goals. The lower fork represents their “most feared selves,” the result of life that does not go as planned, revealing the most deleterious outcomes. Students describe each fork in vivid detail and then determine the actions needed to travel the road of the “best possible self.”

In another possible selves exercise, students draw a tree with branches for each of their possible selves. The possible selves tree is used as a metaphor to help students examine the key roles they will assume in life, their possible selves, and the overall condition of their tree. Then they set goals related to the actions they need to nurture their trees and create an action plan for reaching those goals (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman, Bybee, Terry, & Hart-Johnson, 2004).

Using any of the above techniques for helping students envision and clearly conceptualize their future goals, advisors assist them in designing an action plan to reach those goals based on successful strategies of hope building identified by Lopez et al. (2004). Hope consists of three elements: a) a clearly articulated, specific, and realistic goal that the student is motivated to attain; b) specific pathways or strategies for reaching that goal; and c) the ability to initiate and sustain the motivation needed to deploy those strategies. The action plan should focus on the goals identified in the possible selves exercises as most valuable or salient to the student. Articulating the goals in measureable, observable action terms will help the student determine the realistic prospects for reaching them and knowing when they have been achieved; breaking each goal down into manageable steps will allow for both short- and long-term objectives to be identified. Then the advisor brainstorms with the student multiple pathways for reaching the goals, accentuating the student’s strengths as specific pathways toward goal attainment.

Additionally, the advisor asks the student to identify potential obstacles and how to respond to them. Campus resources and sources of social support in the student’s life are also identified at this stage. Finally, the advisor helps the student identify the best strategy to pursue each week and agrees to check in with the student in one week to see the student’s progress.

## Techniques for Applying Strengths to Challenges

In the final phase of strengths-based advising, students apply their strengths to new situations, particularly to the challenges they face in college. By this point in the process, students are familiar with their strengths and have developed personally meaningful goals and are working toward achieving them. However, challenges are inevitable and obstacles to success abound. Advisors need to help students develop the key skill of transferring strengths from one context to another.

After asking about specific ways they overcame past challenges (What strengths did they use? What else helped them?), advisors brainstorm with students about ways to use one of their talents to address a current problem and thus create a specific response to the challenge while offering encouragement based on previous successes. In an international study, researchers found that high achievers invented ways of using their strengths to address challenges (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Thus, advisors should not skip this step with students. They need to brainstorm at least one idea to capitalize on a talent. By doing so, advisors provide students with a reminder that they have the solution within them and that they have been successful before—which can energize and motivate them to tackle the current challenge.

## Training Strengths-Based Advisors

Because strengths-based advising represents a paradigm shift, particularly for many faculty members, advisor training is a necessary first step toward creating the best advising for students. Such training can be offered as a full-day workshop or in multiple smaller modules. Key ingredients in the training include a) an introduction to the strengths philosophy; b) an exercise to identify one's own strengths as an advisor and gain practice with tools or questions used to help students identify their strengths; c) the steps of strengths-based advising and the questions or exercises available to facilitate each step; and d) practicing with strengths-based advising strategies in case studies or role plays.

To introduce the strengths philosophy and provide evidence of its effectiveness, facilitators may need to spend more time training faculty members than professional advisors. Addressing faculty concerns, such as their lack of familiarity or confidence in using a particular tool to identify student talents, may also prove time consuming. Faculty advisors who are comfortable with the strengths philosophy can conduct the workshop to make it particularly effective with fellow faculty members.

## Strengths-Based Advising Scenario

Students struggling academically present a common challenge to academic advisors. The following scenario demonstrates ways that advisors can utilize strengths-based advising to help students address difficult situations.

## Scenario I

*A first-generation college sophomore, Riley, says to an advisor, Skylar, “I’m having trouble in two of my classes. I don’t understand what the professor is talking about in one of them, but it’s a required course in my major. The other is only a gen ed course, but I keep getting low grades on the writing assignments. I was always good in writing in high school. If I do poorly, this will lower my GPA, and I just got off academic probation last term. I want to stay in my major, but I don’t know if I can pass this one course and that would really disappoint my family. What do you suggest I do?”*

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The advisor, Skylar, who adopts a strengths-based approach, asks Riley to identify the areas going well in the other two classes: “What classes seem easier to you?” Strengths-based advisors do not initiate the conversation by bringing up the areas where students are struggling. Instead, they focus on positive topics to help students identify specific academic tasks in which they have achieved some success.

Riley replies, “I’m getting good grades in my public speaking and psychology classes.”

Skylar asks for elaboration: “What specific academic tasks do you do well in those classes?”

“I think it’s easy to participate in class discussions and group projects, and I am pretty good at giving talks. . . . I like psychology class, especially writing the reflective journal entries about class topics.”

Skylar digs deeper, asking a series of questions that begin with “Which strengths are you using when participating . . .” and following with specific instances Riley has mentioned: “in class discussions?” “engaged in group projects?” “giving oral presentations?” “writing journal entries?” Finally, Skylar asks Riley to summarize: “What energizes you when you’re doing these things?”

Expressing an ability to relate well with other people and persuade them to engage in an activity, Riley responds readily, “Getting up in front of people, telling stories. I understand what makes people tick . . . and I’m fascinated by why people do what they do.” Riley describes the enjoyment of thinking about and analyzing everyday phenomena.

Skylar asks, “How are the difficult classes different from psychology and public speaking?” Riley explains that in the difficult classes the professors lecture and do not utilize any group projects or class participation. Based on Riley’s additional comments, Skylar surmises that the projects require analytical and research-based writing rather than reflective journaling. Wanting Riley to invent ways to use personal skills in challenging situations, Skylar follows up by asking, “Which of your strengths might be useful in those classes?”

“Well, maybe I could study with other students in the class and create my own group experience.”

Acknowledging this as a good start, Skylar pushes for more ideas: “What can be done to understand the professors better? Have you been in this situation before—where it was really important to understand someone but you had difficulty doing so?”

Riley laughs before explaining, “Definitely! When I took my first job and my boss was from Korea, I had trouble understanding his English at first.”

“So what did you do to understand him?”

“I watched his gestures and listened to his tone of voice.”

“Why not use the same technique in the classroom?” Skylar advises Riley to watch the instructor’s body language to determine the important points, which are likely to be on an exam.

“What else did you do to understand your boss?”

“I learned the job by listening carefully and by asking questions of the workers who had been there awhile. It took some time to figure him out!”

“Exactly!” Skylar exclaims. “The more you listen carefully and watch body language, the easier it will be to understand your professors. Also, I suggest writing down key words to look up after class, and be sure to read the assigned text and discuss it with others before class. You’ll find the same strategies that worked for you in your first job are likely to work in these classes as well.”

Skylar then changes tack: “What about those papers that require analytical, research-based writing? How do you prepare your speeches, particularly the persuasive ones?”

“I spend a lot of time searching the Internet for evidence to support my arguments.”

“This strategy should help you with analytical papers too. Why don’t you prepare your papers as if you’re making an oral presentation? Record yourself making the presentation and then transcribe it. Take the transcript to the Writing Center for help in organizing it into a research paper.”

Before leaving the office, Riley agrees to organize a group of friends in the course with the unclear instructor and arrange for them to meet the day before each class to talk about their assigned reading and compare notes from previous lectures. Skylar offers to e-mail the following week to check on Riley’s progress with these plans and to set up another appointment to talk about choices for a major.

## Summary

A strengths-based approach to advising offers a unique lens through which to view students and the advising process. Rather than assessing only student needs or the gaps that exist between student skills and the demands of the college environment, advisors using a strengths-based approach first address student motivation. When students are aware of their strengths and learn to apply them to the challenges they face in college, they will be motivated to set goals, achieve at a higher level, make positive choices, and complete required tasks.

In many ways, emphasizing student deficits and needs puts the focus on the student who is not there. In a strengths-based approach, the advisor works with the student who is there—the one who brings talents into the room as a foundation for addressing the future. Rather than conveying to students that one pathway leads to college success, a strengths-based approach encourages them to capitalize on their unique gifts to become the best version of themselves and gain the most they can from their college experiences. In the process, not only do students achieve success, but advisors thrive as well.

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