Three questions regularly arise in conversations among people who are interested in "strengths." Those who are intrigued by the concept want to know the purpose of a strengths-based program. Those who are thinking about using this approach with large groups of students want to know how well it works. And those who have been using this approach on a small scale or for a short period of time want to know what the next steps are. In this article, I'll address each of these questions in an effort to help all of us think about the bigger picture of the strengths-based work that we do.

Strengths — For What?

Usually when anyone wants to "strengthen" something, there's an underlying purpose or reason for wanting to be stronger. Athletes don't engage in strengths training just because it's fun, builders don't strengthen the joists of a floor because they want to spend more money, and team leaders don't strengthen the relationships among their team members because they just enjoy talking to one another. In all these cases, there's a bigger reason for what they are doing — the strengthening process is not an end in itself. It's the same with college students and strengths-based programs. It's crucial not to confuse *process* with *product*. The product is not to learn about your strengths — learning about your strengths is part of a *process* that has a bigger purpose. As you plan your strengths-based program, it's important to decide in advance what outcomes you want to produce in your students — what is your product or end result?

Some possible "products" might include higher levels of engagement in the learning process, learning to take the perspective of others who are very different from oneself, higher levels of academic achievement, ability to make an informed career choice, or the development of leadership skills. In each case, the end result desired determines how a strengths approach is used in creating a program. We don't simply "learn about strengths" and then expect everything to magically fall into place.

A strengths-based program is a tool or a process, a way of delivering the product. For instance, in order to teach leadership skills, we may begin with an identification of talent themes as a way of increasing the necessary self-awareness that is one component of leadership. But we don't stop there! We weave into the leadership development program a way of perceiving and interacting with others that brings out their strengths and encourages their active contribution to the team. We teach emerging leaders to create teams that represent a diversity of talents, develop emotional intelligence, build on existing talents in the process of becoming more aware of emotions in oneself and others, and manage emotions in oneself.

We continually ask ourselves, "strengths for what?" The strengths philosophy is woven into the material that we would normally deliver in our effort to accomplish our goal. We infuse talent identification into leadership programming that focuses on emotional intelligence. We weave a strengths development process into our first-year seminars that teach academic skills to give students a greater sense of control over their academic future. We communicate a philosophy of multiplying talents with knowledge and skills as we teach the introductory course in chemistry. We fold a discussion of how one's talent themes fit with interests in particular careers or majors into our conversations about the career decision-making process as we advise students.

Identifying and affirming our students' talent themes may start the conversation in each of the examples above, but the conversations never stop there. There is a continual emphasis on how those talents can be multiplied through acquiring knowledge and skills, which takes effort — a key determinant of college student success. Our conversations and programs are *about* something else — they are about leadership, resilience, or career decision-making. They are about chemistry, writing skills, and psychology.
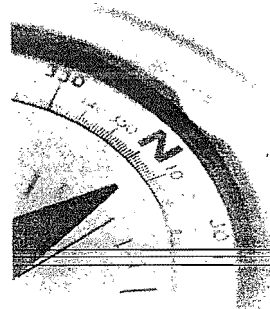
Strengths — So What?

The second question that quickly arises once a person starts thinking about using a strengths-based approach in any of their existing programs is whether it works or not. "So what?" is the question most university administrators ask. If we're going to invest time and money in a new approach, we need to know that it works.

But before you can know if something works, you need to know what it was supposed to accomplish. So we keep going back to the importance of determining in advance what your program outcomes are — what do you expect to be different about your students after they have participated? What is the purpose of the program? If you've answered the first question (strengths for what?) you are well-positioned to answer the second one as well.

Your answers may come from learning about the research others have conducted using a strengths-based approach, or they may come from your own pilot programs. Because so little research has been published in this newly emerging area, Gallup offers Webinars on strengths-based intervention research. The latest studies will be highlighted in the Webinars, along with specific tips for conducting your own studies to see if the programs are working on your campus.

Some of the outcomes that previous studies have found to be significantly affected by a strengths-based

intervention are outlined below. But keep in mind, each strengths-based intervention was different, and the students sampled are not the same as your students. That's why it's important not only to read carefully about other studies, but also to conduct them on your own campus to test what works best with your students.

Positive academic outcomes of a strengths-based approach include: engaged learning, GPA, academic self-efficacy, academic confidence, mindset, intention to reenroll, and perceived academic control. Interventions ranged from out-of-class activities to journaling to modules within courses and even full courses. Some of the interventions were short-term, and some lasted an entire semester. Some involved first-year students; others involved representative samples across the class levels.

Other outcomes affected by strengths-based programming include increases in hope, optimism, career decision-making self-efficacy, satisfaction with advising, engagement in campus life, and a psychological sense of community. In the Webinars, we'll feature what worked best based on these studies.

Strengths — Now What?

For those of us that have been using a strengths-based approach to specific programs on campus, the third question that arises is "now what?" How do we take this to the next level? How do we deepen and expand its potential for all our students — and for our staff and faculty, as well?

I think the best answer to this question is to blend the most effective strategies for helping students fully develop their strengths with what higher education research tells us are the most effective strategies for impacting student success. For example, if we know from Pascarella and Terenzini's 2005 large-scale analysis, reported in *How College Affects Students*, that service-learning and ethnic studies courses significantly affect students' cognitive and affective development in college, we can choose those courses as sites for infusing the best strategies of a strengths-based approach.

For instance, if we know that service-learning courses are most effective when (a) students are oriented in such a way as to prepare them psychologically for the experience and how they can benefit from it, (b) the service aligns with the course goals and content, (c) students have the opportunity to reflect on the experience, both in class and in writing, and (d) there is adequate variety, challenge, responsibility, and sense of making a difference on the site, then we can infuse a strengths approach with these best practices as we design the courses. We would help students select a site and choose tasks that will capitalize on their talent themes and bring out their best. We would include in the orientation how to leverage their talents on site — and what skills and knowledge they will need to learn in order to maximize their talents as they work with a particular population. We would provide reflection opportunities that fit their mix of talents. We would carefully work with the student to ensure that the service-learning opportunities are an appropriate blend of challenge

and support for where they are in their own talent and identity development. In short, we would craft the best possible service-learning course that capitalizes on effective strengths practices and blend them with the best practices in higher education.

Diversity training is another area that holds significant promise for blending a strengths approach with existing strategies that are successful in helping students develop intercultural competencies. The late Don Clifton had commented that when people learned about others' strengths, they started seeing other people as unique individuals rather than stereotyping them based on race or gender or any other visible category. Research in corporations is beginning to bear this out — managers of a different race than their employees typically experience much more conflict than same-race manager-employee pairs. But a recent study showed that when managers learned to take a strengths-based approach to their management style, the level of conflict with their employees of a different race was reduced to the same level as with their same-race employees.

What would it look like to take a strengths-based approach to diversity training programs on our campuses? How could we fuse perspective-taking skills with learning about the unique strengths of others who are different so that we learn not only to appreciate others but to partner with them more effectively? Imagine the impact of blending the best strengths development strategies with the best strategies for cultivating intercultural effectiveness!

Other potential answers to the "now what?" question will be discussed over the coming year. Gallup is planning a series of dialogues among innovative practitioners — and you can eavesdrop online! I'll be interviewing people from a variety of campuses who are expanding and deepening their strengths-based approaches. The interview will be "live" in a Webinar format so that participants can listen in *and* ask questions of the participants. Potential topics include a strengths-based approach to faculty development, strengths-based teaching, student leadership programs, sophomore programming, career centers, learning communities, study abroad programs, and staff training.

So plan to join in on the multiple opportunities for continuing dialogue in the coming year. Along with the Webinars, there are conference sessions at the First-Year Experience conference and at NASPA that will address the continuum of strengths programming. Whether your question is "for what?," "so what?," or "now what?," we invite you to be part of the ongoing conversation that sees the big picture of how a strengths-based approach to learning and development can help our students succeed!