

## STRENGTHS-BASED ADVISING

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### Key Learning Points

1. Good advising may be the single most underestimated characteristic of a successful college experience (Light, 2001). It is at the heart of all our efforts to educate and retain students (Tinto, 1998).
2. At its best, advising is a relationship that enables students to get the most from their college experiences.
3. The best advisors are those who see advising as integral to student success and view their own role as student advocate and guide. They like students, know how to connect with them, and realize that each student is unique. They believe that all students can learn under the right conditions.
4. The greatest impact from advising occurs when advisors are knowledgeable, accessible, and concerned and when advising is planning-centered, goal-directed, and strengths-based.
5. A strengths philosophy recognizes the talents that students bring with them into the learning environment and helps students further develop and apply those talents to new challenges.
6. Talents are ways of seeing the world and interacting with it that can be productively applied.
7. When appropriate knowledge and skills are added to natural talents, strengths can be developed.
8. Healthy, caring relationships facilitate the development of strengths (Clifton, Anderson, & Schreiner, 2006).
9. The purpose of strengths-based advising is to tap into student motivation in order to engage students in their own learning, so that they can achieve their potential and experience success.
10. A strengths-based approach to advising promotes student achievement because it (a) builds self-efficacy and intrinsic motivation, (b) generates positive emotions that enhance students' problem-solving and capacity for creativity, and (c) develops a wider repertoire of success strategies and coping skills.
11. The steps of strengths-based advising include:
  - a. **Identify** students' strengths.
  - b. **Affirm** their strengths and increase their awareness of their strengths.
  - c. **Envision** a future by discussing their aspirations and how their strengths can help them reach their goals.
  - d. **Plan** specific steps that students can take to meet their goals.
  - e. **Apply** their strengths to challenges they face. Help students identify the skills and knowledge they need to add to their natural talents in order to develop strengths.

## **Strengths-Based Advising Sessions**

### Goals for the First Session:

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

### Advisor's Role:

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

### Questions that may be helpful in meeting these goals:

1. Tell me a little bit about how you decided to come to this college. What are you looking forward to the most about being here?
2. When you heard you were supposed to meet with your advisor, what did you think that would involve? What do you think an advisor is supposed to do? Why do you think this college assigns students to advisors?
3. What would you like to have happen as a result of this advising relationship? How do you think I can be of the most help to you?
4. What kinds of things interest you most right now—what things can you do for hours at a time or go out of your way to make time for?
5. What kind of experiences have you had in your prior schooling?
  - a. What was high school like for you? (best part/worst part)
  - b. What were your favorite courses or types of assignments? What was it about these that made them enjoyable to you? (connect to particular courses in college that may also bring out their best)
  - c. What kinds of teachers did you find you connected best with? How would you describe what they did that helped you learn?
  - d. Tell me about one of your successes in high school. Where have you experienced success? (connect that to college resources/activities/experiences where they could continue to experience that type of success)
6. Why did you think it was important to go to college? Has a college education always been part of your dream?
7. How does your family feel about your decision to go to this college?

8. What do you want to be able to do as a result of going to college? Where do you see yourself after graduating from this place? What type of majors have you considered in order to prepare yourself for doing that?
9. Describe for me what a “good day” is like for you. What kinds of things do you do or what kind of people are you with when you are having a good day?
10. How about a bad day—what kinds of things happen on those days? What are the kinds of experiences you want to avoid at all costs?
11. What kinds of things come easily to you? (not necessarily academic, but help the student connect those talents to academic situations)
12. What kinds of challenges or concerns do you have about being in college? When you have faced challenges like this before in your life, how have you handled them?

### **Questions for each phase of strengths-based advising**

**STEP 1: Identify** students’ strengths.

Questions to ask to help students identify their strengths:

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

**STEP 2: Affirm** their strengths and increase their awareness of their strengths.

1. Which of your strengths do you feel you rely on most to be successful?

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

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

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

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

1. Select one aspect of yourself that you would like to develop while you are in college—academic, interpersonal, physical, and/or spiritual. Select one that is personally meaningful and that is key to you becoming the person you want to be as a college graduate.
2. Hone that aspect of yourself so that it is a SMART goal—specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely. For instance, an aspect of yourself that you want to develop may be that you want to be a good leader so you can get a job in management in a corporation. Translate this into a “smart” goal:
  - a. Specific—“a good leader” isn’t very specific. “I want to become someone that is able to positively influence the people with whom I work” is more specific, and “I will take a Public Speaking course so that I learn effective communication skills” is even more specific.
  - b. Measurable—what does it mean to positively influence someone? Define it in terms that you can see and measure. For instance, “I will take a Public Speaking course and ask my professor and peers in the class for feedback on my communication skills.”
  - c. Attainable—the goal needs to be under your control and able to be attained by you, regardless of what others around you do. For instance, “I

will have a good relationship with my peers” isn’t completely under your control. But “I will ask my peers for feedback” is.

- d. Realistic—your goal needs to be something you can accomplish as a college student with your particular constellation of talents. “I will get a job as the president of a corporation when I graduate” isn’t realistic. But “I will apply to at least five companies for management training opportunities” is.
  - e. Timely—your goal needs to be something you can accomplish while you are in college—and the shorter the time frame, the easier it is to stay motivated! “I will graduate with honors” may be a long-term goal, but “I will turn in all my assignments early this semester so I can get feedback and then revise them” is an intermediate step toward the long-term goal that may keep you more motivated this semester!
3. What strengths do you have that can help you progress toward your goal? How can you capitalize on those strengths?
  4. What could keep you from accomplishing your goal? What obstacles may get in the way? How can you use your strengths to overcome those obstacles?
  5. What campus resources or people in your life can help you reach your goal? What campus organizations would help you most?

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

- Course Selection
  - What kinds of courses do you tend to do well in or enjoy most?
  - What courses sound most interesting to you? Which of these meet graduation or major requirements?
  - What kinds of things do you need to learn in order to be successful in meeting your life goals? What skills and knowledge do you need to add to the talents you already have?
  - What other demands do you have this term—sports, family, work, and other obligations that will affect your commitment to classes? How do these courses fit with your other obligations?
  - What courses are most likely to play to your strengths?
- Career Planning
  - What are some past jobs or hobbies or volunteer opportunities you have had that were especially enjoyable to you? What made this experience so enjoyable?
  - What kind of environment tends to bring out your best? Describe this in as much detail as possible.
  - Who do you admire or want to be like? What is it about this person that you admire most? What do they do that you would like to do?
  - Given your strengths, what approach might work best to find out the types of careers that would be a good fit for you? (Example: not everyone enjoys taking interest inventories, but that could be a good suggestion for someone whose strengths include curiosity about themselves.)
- Academic Struggles

- What are some academic tasks that you do well or that come easily for you?
- What strengths are you using when you are engaging in these tasks?
- How could you use those same strengths when you are struggling with an academic task?
- Adjustment Difficulties
  - When have you experienced loneliness/homesickness/conflict before in your life?
  - What did you do in those situations that seemed to help you?

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