

The Importance of Increasing the Focus on Strengths Utilizing the Current CliftonStrengths Program at CU Boulder

Submitted by Cori Shaff & Kristin Williams, Career Services

Building a Strengths Based campus

Imagine CU Boulder as a campus where **every** student understood and utilized their natural talents in positive and productive ways. A place where each of these individuals recognized who they are at their core and most authentic self and had tangible opportunities to apply these talents for the good of the campus community, Colorado, and the world. As each student develops their talent through practice, skill building, and gaining knowledge, they can start intentionally living from their Strengths, actively engaging with their respective role(s), and having high levels of well-being.

Building a Strengths-Based campus has been a thriving grassroots effort for five years due to a generous gift from a CU Boulder family. This effort includes an active Advisory Council of 15 staff, faculty, and students that meets monthly, 60 (since 2015) professional development sessions for 500 faculty, staff, and students, and a growing number of campus members who participate in the CliftonStrengths program (5100 new participants in 2017 and 4300 in 2016). However, there is room for growth and to reach more students, so that each one has the privilege and access to know their Strengths and how to utilize those Strengths in productive and healthy ways.

Current Student Engagement

Academic Experience

Each semester, all incoming students (first-year and transfer) receive an access code to complete the CliftonStrengths online. Over the last three years, an average of 32% of those incoming students complete the online assessment. These students are exposed to Strengths before they set foot on campus and these students experience the value CU Boulder places on welcoming them and their unique Strengths. In addition, a variety of academic classes, leadership initiatives, on-campus employment, and extracurricular groups collaborate with the CliftonStrengths program to bring the online assessment and group facilitation to groups of students. When students engage with their Strengths through various touchpoints in classes, programs, student organizations and services, and on-campus employment, it helps that student deepen their knowledge and development of their individual Strengths.

This Fall 2017, the following academic classes and programs integrated CliftonStrengths with the goal of increasing student engagement in the class discussions, coursework, and applicable learning outcomes:

Engineering Launch, Business Core 1030, 10 First-Year Seminars, 7 First-Year Writing & Rhetoric courses, the President's Leadership Class, Communication and Society RAP, Farrand RAP, the Leadership Minor Introduction Course, Engineering Projects, a ROTC course, Engineering Management, and the English Internship Course.

Upon participating in an interactive lesson CliftonStrengths, numerous students shared how this information had a positive impact of them:

[I] think this was by far the most beneficial lecture I have been to so far in my college career.
-Jeff, Economics Major

I enjoyed focusing and talking about how our results from the [Clifton]Strengths apply to a team, because originally, I only saw my strengths as an individual thing, not something that works well with others. -Katie, Political Science Major

Knowing my strengths has allowed me to become more confident as a worker. I have been more willing to contribute to projects knowing that my personal attributes offer a unique benefit to the team's dynamic. -Braydon, Student Assistant in Athletics

I am excited to learn more about every person's strengths and how they may impact their leadership abilities-- including myself! – Taylor

During the summer, the following Bridge Programs introduced CliftonStrengths to their students with the goal of welcoming students and providing a space for them to actively consider how they can be successful at CU Boulder:

Veterans, Fall Gateway (SASC), Pre-Collegiate, and the Stampede Leadership Camp

Student Employment and Extracurricular

A variety of on-campus student employers and active extracurricular groups integrated CliftonStrengths into their training, leadership development, and as a method to develop a productive group environment:

CUSG Tri-Executives and student leaders and staff, Recreation Center Facilities' Team, Resident Assistants, Community Coordinators, Off-Campus Student Housing student employees, Night Ride student leaders, Women's Resource Center student employees and volunteers, Volunteer Resource Center student employees, volunteers, and Alternative Break Site Leaders, the ASAP tutor-mentors, and the Health Promotions student employees and volunteers.

Career Services

Career Services helps students discover who they are, where they are going, and how to get there. This Career Development process naturally incorporates a strengths-based approach by holistically understanding the student, and how to best serve each individual in their goals and career exploration. CliftonStrengths is an accessible and free way to provide students with the language of what are their areas of natural talent, where they feel energized by what they are doing, get lost in the excitement of a project, and how they can naturally be themselves in the world of work. By helping students uncover their Strengths, students identify the areas in which they excel. Within Career Services, CliftonStrengths is not a one-time assessment used solely for generating a list of results, but it is a tool, which provides and promotes an individuals' ongoing development of their innate talents, and encourages people to view a problem, stressful situation, or academic goal from their personal Strengths lens. CliftonStrengths can also be used to aid in resume and cover letter writing, developing an elevator pitch, networking within an industry, interviewing, and negotiating a salary. By students understanding their natural way of *how* they approach group work, relationships, studying, managing finances, and finding career satisfaction is achievable with the CliftonStrengths tool.

Peer Coaching Model

Creating an inclusive culture at CU is important to ensure our students feel connected to one another and the University. Inclusivity not only affects students' retention at CU, but also promotes students' health and wellbeing. Peer-to-peer strengths coaching is an impactful way we can promote an inclusive

CU that helps students across majors, years, cultures, and diverse backgrounds connect with a shared language.

Currently, the Strengths Peer Coaching Program invests in training current students in the CliftonStrengths assessment and interpretation. The Peer Coach meets with students in one-on-one meetings to help students discover and develop their unique Strengths. Coaches guide their peers through strengths-based conversations and goal setting, in addition, are able to use Strengths in their own professional development. Coaching sessions are offered to any student at any time, which allows access for every student to take the assessment and receive individualized feedback and support from a peer, which may be more appealing to some students than meeting with a professional staff member.

Potential Student Engagement

While the CliftonStrengths program has had success over the last several years, there are additional opportunities to increase the usage of CliftonStrengths to have a positive impact on the student's engagement and overall well-being so that they can be successful during their time at CU Boulder and post-graduation.

Academic Integration

We suggest that all first-year classes that are small (less than 25 students) and/or project-based incorporate CliftonStrengths into their curriculum with the goal of increasing student engagement and collaboration. Additionally, the course would provide space and time for students to clarify their natural talents in order to critically analyze and understand a unique path that will help them flourish.

Given that the results from CliftonStrengths provide specific ideas for action in a professional setting, we recommend integrating the program into a student's academic internship plan would be a critical part of their development.

Lastly, as students understand their Strengths, they can utilize this knowledge to authentically find faculty and staff mentors; which is a key relationship that research has shown positively impacts a student's college experience as well as their perception that their college education was worth the cost. As more faculty and staff complete CliftonStrengths, we can create a list of Strengths Champions who are willing to serve as mentors for students. This database would provide an avenue for students to find a mentor with similar or complementary Strengths. Additionally, Strengths would be the foundation and ongoing information for the mentoring relationship.

Campus Climate

Building self-awareness leads to having increase awareness of others' strengths and what value they bring. What was once frustrating can now be seen as a value-add and thus more appreciation for differences. For example, students could choose to post their Strengths outside of their Residence Hall room, in their email signature, and when they introduce themselves in a class or academic group project. This information would serve as the catalyst for building community and responding to conflict and misunderstandings.

Peer Coaching Model

As the CliftonStrengths program continues to grow, and more students are learning about their Strengths in the classroom, group settings, student organizations and in on-campus jobs, Peer Coaching can be a way for students to receive individualized follow up sessions to further explore and develop their unique Strengths. We suggest that all incoming students have a requirement to meet with a Peer Coach during their first semester at CU. This conversation would provide a positive introduction to the campus and develop a framework for the student to actively engage in their overall experience.

Summary:

If all CU Boulder students have the opportunity to know and develop their Strengths, there is the potential that they will:

- Have a shared language to build positive relationships with peers
- Know how their individual Strengths can play a role in their current job, role, position, class, or current life stressor/situation
- Graduate from CU Boulder within 6 years and with higher GPAs because they have a deeper understanding of how they can utilize their Strengths to be successful in the classroom
- Retain at CU Boulder because they feel connected and value the University

Additional Information:

The Principles of Strengths-Based Education - <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.2202/1940-1639.1041?needAccess=true>

- The strengths philosophy explores ways to empower individuals to flourish rather than simply survive (Liesveld & Miller, 2005) and presupposes that capitalizing on one's best qualities is likely to lead to greater success than would be possible by making a comparable investment of effort into overcoming personal weaknesses or deficiencies (Clifton & Harter, 2003; Clifton & Nelson, 1992). Strengths-based education therefore is built upon these assumptions.
- Principle 4: Deliberate application of strengths within and outside of the classroom fosters development and integration of new behaviors associated with positive outcomes.

Well-Being: An Essential Outcome for Higher Education-

<http://naspa.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/00091383.2016.1163163?needAccess=true>

- Higher education does more than give students the skills and capacities to be productive members of the workforce. It gives them the confidence, self-esteem, and sense of purpose that will enable them to find meaning in their lives and careers.
- Like any campus initiative that involves new ideas and approaches to learning, engaging faculty and staff broadly in attending to the connection of student well-being with learning can be challenging.
- Colleges and universities need to equip students not only with the skills to succeed, but also with the opportunity to seek happiness, fulfillment, and purpose to give meaning to their lives and careers.

References:

Clifton, D. O., & Harter, J. K. (2003). Investing in strengths. In K. S. Cameron, J. E. Dutton, & R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship* (pp. 111-121). San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Clifton, D. O., & Nelson, P. (1992). *Soar with your strengths*. New York: Dell.

Gallup (2015). *Great Jobs, Great Lives*. Retrieved from: <http://news.gallup.com/reports/197144/gallup-purdue-index-report-2015.aspx>

Gallup (2017). *CliftonStrengths for Students*, New York: Gallup Press

Liesveld, R., & Miller, J. A. (2005). *Teach with your strengths: How great teachers inspire their students*. New York: Gallup Press.