

Strengths-Based Advising: A New Lens for Higher Education

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Strengths-based advising is proposed as a new lens for higher education, one that enables advisors to see diverse groups of students fulfill their potential and achieve excellence. Based on research from social work, positive psychology, and the business world, this approach enables advisors to identify and build on the inherent talents students bring with them into the college and university setting, teaching students to develop and apply their strengths to new and challenging learning tasks. This explicit focus on students' natural talents builds the confidence and motivation necessary for achievement and persistence in college. We contend that this approach to advising represents a much-needed paradigm shift within higher education.

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In a recent issue of *About Campus*, Hunter and White (2004, p. 20) asked an important question: "Could fixing academic advising fix higher education?" Their answer—and ours—is a resounding "yes!" At its best, advising can provide students with the opportunity for continued interaction with concerned adults who can help them shape a meaningful college experience. Hunter and White suggested that academic advising needs to be viewed by faculty members, students, administrators, and staff as an activity that is central, rather than peripheral, to the educational enterprise. They then proposed strategies and structures that would bring advising to the forefront of the college or university system. While we concur with their characteristics of an effective advising system, we believe that a strengths-based approach to the advising relationship can take academic advising to a new level of effectiveness that is well deserving of center stage.

Since the mid-1970s, developmental advising has been the dominant model to which advising professionals have subscribed, in theory if not always in practice (Crookston, 1972; Gordon, 1994; Grites & Gordon, 2000; Winston, Miller, Ender, & Grites, 1984). Based on advisors' ongoing relationships with students, developmental advising is characterized by the advisor helping the student become more aware of his or her values, personal characteristics, and needs. Within this model, students' goal setting, problem solving, and educational plan-

ning are emphasized (Gardiner, 1994).

Typically, developmental advising is contrasted with prescriptive advising (Crookston, 1972; Fielstein, 1989) in which the advisor-student relationship is described as more hierarchical and authoritarian, and the techniques are considered more directive and logistical than in the developmental approach. While some researchers have suggested that prescriptive advising is sometimes more helpful with students of color and first-year students (Brown & Rivas, 1994; Chando, 1997; Smith, 2002), most authors advocating a particular approach to academic advising have used developmental advising as the prevailing paradigm. They have demonstrated how their own approaches either fall within its scope (Mayhall & Burg, 2002; Melander, 2002) or are more workable alternatives to a theory that is rarely practiced, particularly by faculty, in real advising settings (Hemwall & Trachte, 1999; Lowenstein, 1999).

While developmental advising remains the dominant paradigm to which most advisors subscribe, we believe a new lens is needed to sharpen the vision of academic advisors. The prevailing philosophy of needs assessment, deficit remediation, and problem solving as the best pathways to lifelong growth is no longer adequate for facilitating the success of today's diverse learners.

The foundational assumption underlying much of higher education is a belief that deficit remediation is the most effective strategy for enabling students to successfully complete a college degree. Out of a concern for meeting students' needs and being sensitive to their lack of adequate preparation for college, postsecondary educators focus on the areas of deficit and build programs and services around them. Faculty and staff go to great lengths to assess the abilities of entering college students and to place them in remedial courses or provide special services based on the deficits discovered in the assessment process. The advising session, particularly for at-risk students, is designed to teach advisees how to set appropriate and realistic goals for overcoming their deficits, make decisions about the best course of action, and take advantage of support services available to meet their needs (Abelman & Molina, 2002; Ender & Wilkie, 2000). Even those not designated at risk find that their advisors are focused primarily on areas in which the student

needs assistance to meet the expectations placed on her or him in the college environment. Advisors may discuss students' strengths in the assessment process, but too often this discussion remains rhetoric, a postscript offered as the student leaves the office.

Those in American higher education are not unique in a deficit-based philosophical approach to improved success. Gallup surveys conducted in countries around the world show that the majority of people surveyed believes that addressing weaknesses will "help people improve more" than will an emphasis on their strengths (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). As we as well as Hodges and Clifton have seen, addressing weaknesses can result in at least short-term improvement: performance often improves, but not to levels of excellence and often at a very high price. Attrition rates remain very high among at-risk students, and low levels of academic motivation are often the norm (Anderson & McGuire, 1997). In addition, as Yarbrough (2002, p. 63) noted, advising encounters that consist of "probing questions designed to illuminate and clarify the shortcomings and inadequacies of the student . . . [are] potentially demoralizing." As a result of this reduced motivation, students become less involved in the campus community, believing that they do not really belong there in the first place, and they actively avoid and resist the very services designed to help them overcome their deficits. Faculty and staff then invest less time and energy with these students, either believing that they should not have been admitted or believing that the students are not motivated enough to overcome their weaknesses. When student weakness is the focus of attention, a vicious cycle of low expectations is initiated among students, faculty members, and staff alike. In short, deficit-based remediation largely fails to address the most fundamental challenge in producing high academic achievement: student engagement in his or her own learning processes.

The Foundations of Strengths-Based Advising

Research conducted by the Gallup Organization (Clifton & Harter, 2003) has led to a potentially revolutionary discovery: Individuals who focus on their weaknesses and remediate them are only able to achieve average performance at best; they are able to gain far more—and even to reach levels of excellence—when they expend comparable effort to build on their talents. This discovery is of enormous import to higher education as a whole, but it has particular application to the relationships of advisors and students.

Building on the research initially conducted in

the business world (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Harter & Schmidt, 2002), we have applied this discovery to the student-advisor relationship with significant success (Schreiner, 2000, 2004) and are advocating a strengths-based approach to advising. While congruent in some ways with the developmental paradigm, through which advisors concentrate on student growth, the strengths-based approach provides a new lens through which to view students, the academic advising relationship, and the broader college experience. This lens shifts the focus of the advising sessions from areas of need to areas of talent and engagement. It is an approach through which advisors recognize student motivation as the central objective of advising and explicitly attempt to promote excellence in the student (Anderson & McGuire, 1997).

The foundations for a strengths-based approach to advising are interdisciplinary. One of these bases is characterized by the strengths perspective used in social work: People are assumed to possess much of what they need to grow and succeed (Saleebey, 1992, 1996; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989). Accounts of strengths-based development in business (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Clifton & Harter, 2003; Connelly, 2002; Harter & Schmidt, 2002; Hodges & Clifton, 2004) illustrate another pillar of the strengths-based approach. Those using the business model utilize feedback and awareness of talents in motivating people to excel. Positive organizational scholarship is emerging in the field of organizational development (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003) and contributes an important perspective on thriving, flourishing, vitality, and meaning. The current emphasis on a psychology of human strengths evidenced in the positive psychology movement (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2002; Seligman, 1998; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) also provides a theoretical foundation for the strengths-based approach to advising. This theory involves an emphasis on virtues (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and optimal human functioning and has connections to psychological concepts of self-efficacy (Bandura, 1977, 1997), personal navigation (Sternberg & Spear-Swerling, 1998), and self-esteem (Baumgardner, 1990; Dodgson & Wood, 1998; Steele, Spencer, & Lynch, 1993).

Strengths-based advising uses students' talents as the basis for educational planning (Anderson & McGuire, 1997). It is based on the assumption that students have talents that they bring to the academic environment. These talents, defined as "naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or

behavior that can be productively applied" (Clifton & Harter, 2003, p. 111), may include ways of processing information, interacting with people, perceiving the world, or navigating the environment. When combined with knowledge and skills acquired in the learning process, talents can be developed into strengths. A strength is thus "the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity" (Clifton & Anderson, 2002, p. 8).

In interviews with over 2 million people in a variety of professions across the world, Clifton and Harter (2003) found three consistent characteristics of high achievers: They spend most of their time in their areas of strength; they focus on developing and applying their strengths while managing their weaknesses; they do not necessarily have more talents than other people, but they have developed their capabilities more fully and have learned to apply them to new situations. In many cases, these high achievers invent ways of capitalizing on their strengths as they approach unfamiliar or challenging tasks (Clifton & Anderson, 2002). Psychologists have verified this phenomenon in their studies of people's responses to failure (Dodgson & Wood, 1998). People with high self-esteem, who also tend to be the task-oriented high achievers, are significantly more likely to access thoughts about their personal strengths and suppress thoughts about their weaknesses after a failure. As a result, they rebound relatively quickly from the failure experience and reengage in achievement tasks. Their motivation and task persistence are, in fact, higher after a failure than after a success. As Dodgson and Wood (1998, p. 194) noted, "Focusing on strengths . . . holds the potential for a relatively adaptive response to life's slings and arrows. . . ."

Strengths-based advising is predicated on students' natural talents and is used to build their confidence while motivating them to acquire the knowledge base and skills necessary for college-level achievement. The advisor initiates this approach by identifying and increasing students' awareness of their talents. They then teach the advisees ways of developing their talents into strengths and further developing the competencies that will help them meet their educational and life goals. Finally, they help students apply their strengths to new or challenging situations, such as the career planning process, course selection, adjustment or academic difficulties, and the typical issues that students face in completing their college careers successfully.

Shifting the Perspective to Strengths

The strengths-based approach to advising, while congruent with developmental advising in its

emphasis on a holistic approach to student growth and success and in its tenets of advising as teaching, differs from the developmental model in several significant ways. First, it is based on a different foundation: student motivation instead of needs assessment. 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 and assume that when students are more aware of their strengths, they will be motivated to set goals, achieve at a high level, make positive choices, and complete the tasks they set out to achieve. In many ways, focusing on student deficits and needs is focusing on the student who is not there. However, through 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. As Weick et al. (1989, p. 353) noted, "People do not grow by concentrating on their problems. . . . The effect of a problem focus is to weaken people's confidence in their ability to develop in self-reflective ways." Loehr and Schwartz (2003) also suggested that feelings of deficit constrict an individual's attention and limit her or his possibilities rather than enable her or him to devise creative ways of growing.

Second, strengths-based advising shifts the focus from problems to possibilities. Rather than focusing on tasks that a student cannot complete or the problems the student faces, the advisor emphasizes the abilities a student possesses. He or she helps the student realize how her or his strengths can be used as resources when facing the challenges of the college experience. As Weick et al. (1989, p. 354) stated, "If anything, a strengths perspective is a strategy for seeing; a way to learn to recognize and use what is already available to them. [It] helps people see that they already possess much of what they need to proceed on their chosen path." This approach enables students to build on their past successes and continue to develop according to those strengths.

Third, through a strengths-based approach, advisors frame tasks differently than they do when using developmental advising. Rather than asking the causes of a student's difficulty in achieving academically, the advisor questions the student about the talents and situations that have enabled him or her to be successful in nonacademic arenas, such as athletics or music, and elicits conversations about the process that led to these accomplishments. This reconceptualization is similar to the effect garnered

from the *presuppositional question* that Mayhall and Burg (2002, p. 82) identified as part of solution-focused advising. By presupposing, or assuming, that a strength exists, the advisor presents the task in a new way to the student.

Finally, the feeling students experience in the strengths-based advising session is different than that experienced through developmental advising. Through a strength-based approach, students feel understood and known by their advisors at a deeper level, experience higher motivation levels and a sense of direction and confidence, and report significantly higher satisfaction with advising than do those who receive advising that is deficit based (Schreiner, 2000). They consider the academic advising relationship to be positive because through it they primarily attend to areas that provide a foundation for future success and fulfillment. As strengths are discussed within a context of how they can be developed and applied, students are affirmed and their confidence increases (Schreiner, 2004). Baumgardner's (1990, p. 1,070) research demonstrates that knowing oneself leads to a sense of control and positive emotions that are essential to psychological well-being. In her broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions, Fredrickson (2001, 2003) suggested, "Positive emotions broaden people's modes of thinking and action, which over time builds their enduring personal and social resources" (2003, p. 163).

A strengths-based approach to advising directly addresses the issue of student engagement in the learning process. As Ryan and Deci (2000) have pointed out, intrinsic motivation is facilitated by a sense of competence, facing "optimal challenges" (p. 70), feeling a sense of choice and self-directedness about the activities in which one is engaged, supportive relationships, and "freedom from demeaning feedback" (p. 70). By identifying and nurturing students' strengths, advisors motivate students to become engaged in the learning process. They encourage students while helping them identify the many choices they have for further developing their talents into strengths.

Two additional areas of research provide supportive evidence that strength-based advising can have a positive impact on learning. First, Clausen's (1998) research on psychological turning points of self-perceived growth and change as well as Aldwin, Sutton, and Lachman's (1996) research on the development of coping resources point to positive events as triggers; Clifton and Harter (2003, p. 115) suggested that identifying and understanding one's strengths can be a positive turning point

for many individuals, "triggering changes in how people view themselves in the context of the world around them." Second, Harter and Schmidt's (2002) meta-analysis of research on employee engagement demonstrates that environments that provide opportunities for people to capitalize on their talents have employees with greater levels of engagement and higher levels of productivity than those who do not have the opportunity to apply their talent as consistently. Managers who utilized a strengths-based approach with their employees nearly doubled the likelihood of achieving above-the-median performance, increased their employee retention by 44%, and increased productivity by 38%. In a pre-post control group study of 65 companies, Connelly (2002) documented a meaningful as well as statistically significant difference in employee engagement levels between those who learned about their strengths and how to apply them and those who did not.

The Elements of Strengths-Based Advising

Strengths-based advising begins with an identification of students' talents. Several methods may help advisors in this process. While the use of a specific instrument is not necessary, many advisors find concrete results 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 with which to talk about strengths.

Clifton StrengthsFinder, published by The Gallup Organization and described by Clifton and Anderson (2002), is an instrument used to identify student strengths. Using a forced-choice format, students can take an on-line inventory in approximately 30 minutes. Results are presented as five signature themes that indicate areas of talent. There are 34 possible signature themes that have been identified from a Gallup study of excellence; these themes are "areas where the greatest potential exists for strengths building" (Hodges & Clifton, 2004, p. 256).

A student book, *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond* (Clifton & Anderson, 2002), provides students with specific strategies for educational planning, career planning, and applying strengths to produce academic achievement. It includes access to a complete on-line curriculum and a wealth of strategies for applying strengths to all aspects of the college experience. The book also offers a curriculum outline and learning activities for faculty to use in the classroom.

Advisors may find *CareerQuest*, published by the Institute for Motivational Living (Kulkin & Kulkin, 1997), helpful in identifying students' capabilities. This on-line assessment battery identifies students' strengths as evidenced in their personality styles (using the DISC instrument), learning styles, cognitive thinking styles, and values. Four separate instruments, each with their own on-line or paper curricula and exercises, provide students and advisors with feedback on student potential in these areas. Faculty guides are available for this instrument.

Advisors who do not have access to a particular instrument to identify strengths can ask students questions in the advising session that will enable them to help students identify 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. Advisors can ask students about their most recent high school experiences: What did they learn with the greatest ease? What did their teachers compliment them about most often? What was their favorite class? What subjects did they enjoy studying the most? (Hovland, Anderson, McGuire, Crockett, Kaufmann, & Woodward, 1997). Finally, they can pay attention to students' flow experiences, those times when excellence was achieved without conscious thought (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) or to their yearnings (Clifton & Nelson, 1992). They can also ask students what they have always wanted to do or what they would do if all constraints ceased to exist. This approach is similar to Burg and Mayhall's "miracle question" (2002, p. 82) that leads students to explore possibilities they had not previously considered. Each of these lines of questioning can be effective ways of gaining insight into students' areas of strength.

Once students' potentialities have been identified, the advisors' next step is to increase students' awareness and appreciation of those strengths. Advisors can ask students which of their identified strengths seem most characteristic of them. They can ask students how they have used those strengths to succeed in the past and can ask about the settings in which they most often use these strengths. Advisors can also 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. Other students are reluctant to acknowledge their capabilities because they think there is nothing special about them: This is the way they have always been, and they think everyone else has these abilities as

well. At still other times, students have difficulty appreciating their gifts because they have been criticized for them: Teachers may have labeled them as troublemakers for being gregarious; women may have received negative feedback for being assertive or competitive; men may have been ridiculed for expressing empathy. Thus, the advisor's task is to help students see their strengths as unique and affirm them as assets that can provide the foundation for success in college. This affirmation process is critical, particularly because it provides a cue for students that they can use to recruit their strengths as they face challenges or rebound from failures (Steele et al., 1993).

After identifying students' awareness of their strengths and increasing their awareness of those inclinations, advisors implement the third element of strengths-based advising and discuss with students their aspirations and determine with them which of their talent themes they want to develop further. Congruent with the developmental approach (Crookston, 1972; Gordon, 1994), advisors can ask students where they see themselves in 5 years or can ask about their dreams and life goals. The strengths-based approach can be used to encourage students to explore the specific knowledge and skills they need to build their talent themes into the strengths that can be subsequently applied to life goals. Students need to understand that strengths establish their pathways to goals (Lopez, 2004) and that the college experience can give them the specific venues, knowledge, and skills they need to reach their destinations.

After discussing students' aspirations, advisors can assist students in developing an action plan or a personal success plan. While this is not a new idea, researchers have found that a strengths-based approach applied to the action plan results in higher grade-point averages, increased student retention, greater perceived benefits of the action plan itself, and higher satisfaction with the total advising experience than when a needs assessment approach (through which students identify obstacles to overcome and deficits to address) is applied to the action plan (Schreiner, 2000). In the strengths-based approach to generating an action plan, advisors ask students about the areas in which they most want to achieve college success and then help them identify the types of environments and activities that will enable them to flourish. In addition, they teach students to apply their strengths to areas needing improvement. Teaching students to transfer strengths from one setting to another, such as from the playing field to the classroom, is a criti-

cal component of a strengths-based approach to advising (Clifton & Anderson, 2002), yet it is often missing in the planned advising approach.

Consider Kenny, an all-American point guard on the college basketball team, who came to see his advisor about his academic difficulties in a required statistics course. Slouched in his chair and looking discouraged, he told of his unsuccessful attempts to pass a single exam. He claimed he was following his instructor's directions: He was studying with some women in the class who were getting A's; he was coming to class and trying to pay attention; he was working the formulas step-by-step, but he just did not understand the material, and the strategies were not getting him anywhere.

His advisor first asked, "What do you think enables you to be such a success on the basketball team?" Taken aback, Kenny reminded his advisor that he was there for help with his difficulties in statistics. The advisor remained persistent: What was it that made Kenny an all-American point guard? Kenny straightened in his chair and began to talk basketball: He attributed his success to his ability to "see the floor," to see the big picture of how the game was being played out, to know what he would do next if his first play did not result in a basket, to focus on the game and ignore the distractions of the cheering crowd, to adjust to the shifts in the game and change strategies when necessary. His advisor asked him about his practice habits: Did he wait until the night before a big game and then spend all night practicing in the gym? "Of course not," Kenny replied. "That would be stupid; you couldn't win games that way."

The advisor took Kenny's responses about basketball and applied them to statistics class. If Kenny practiced basketball on a daily basis to be successful, why not study for class daily too? If "seeing the floor" and being a big picture thinker were his strengths at point guard, could they not also be his strengths in learning statistics? Kenny needs to understand the big picture in the problems presented to him; in the case of statistics, why is a particular formula selected before the steps are completed? Realizing that he was studying with people who learned sequentially, which was different from his simultaneous approach to learning, Kenny saw that even though studying with others might be a strategy that often leads to success, it was not the way to enhance his understanding of statistics and he would have to select his study partners carefully. He also learned that he needed to hear more from the instructor about why certain statistical tests were chosen. His advisor also helped him see that the focus that

enabled him to ignore the crowds at the basketball games could help him concentrate his efforts during study time. And his strength in strategic thinking—knowing what he would do if plan A did not result in success on the basketball court—could be applied to learning multiple ways of arriving at the correct results in statistical problems. Kenny left the advising session more confident that he could learn statistics, and by the end of the semester, he had earned a B in the course.

A Strengths-Based Approach to Specific Advising Tasks

While strategies for overall student success form the basis of strengths-based advising, other specific advising tasks can be approached from a strengths perspective. These tasks include educational planning, course selection, career planning, and helping students with adjustment or academic difficulties.

Once students are aware of their talents and have identified aspirations toward which to apply their strengths, educational planning becomes a more coherent process. Student motivation then becomes the foundation for educational planning. Advisors can ask students about their intellectual interests, their curiosities, and how much time and energy they are willing to invest in their college experiences. They can match students' interests and talent themes to particular majors and courses of study. They can point out how particular environments allow their talents to flourish and how particular majors provide a venue in which to capitalize on certain strengths. In addition, advisors can discuss with students specific courses, cocurricular experiences, and work opportunities that would lead to the maximum development of their strengths.

Once the student has identified her or his strengths and goals, course selection becomes a more informed process. In a strengths-based approach to course selection, the advisor encourages students to select courses that are a good fit, that are compatible with their talent themes, their levels of preparation, and existing knowledge and skills. The advisor's primary task is to probe for the student's intellectual interests and curiosities. Courses that address these interests serve as a source of motivation to learn. The advisor can assist a student in perceiving the benefits of a particular course by explaining how it will help him or her develop the skills and knowledge needed to turn individual talents into strengths and thus reach personal and professional objectives.

The strengths-based approach can also be applied

to the career planning process. The advisor can ask questions to facilitate this process, including the following: Which of your strengths do you want to be able to use every day in your career? What kinds of work environments do you think enable your talents to grow and flourish? Where have you had the most success in developing your abilities? Advisors can encourage students to interview successful people in careers that interest them and determine the competencies the person is able to use in her or his own career.

The strengths-based approach to the career planning process does not nullify the highly effective approaches already being used in career planning; it simply allows participants to view the process through a different lens. Research conducted at two liberal arts colleges shows the effect of strengths-based career advising on students. First-year students ($N=743$) were randomly assigned to different career-planning conditions. Results show that career planning from a foundation of strengths awareness and development had a more significant impact ($p < .05$) on students' career decision-making self-efficacy and satisfaction with the on-campus career services than did the traditional methods offered in the career services office (Schreiner, 2004).

Advisors often must address particular difficulties that students experience during college. The strengths-based approach can provide a unique perspective to the conversations an advisor has with a student struggling with expressed challenges. In addressing academic difficulties, the advisor can ask students to list academic tasks, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant, they do with ease. Then the advisor can ask the students to list one or two academic tasks with which they struggle. Going back to the list of academic tasks they do with ease, the advisor can ask the student to identify which of the strengths enabled him or her to accomplish each task. Using this list of strengths that have led to some academic achievements, the advisor can then help the student invent ways of using those same strengths to succeed in the areas with which they are currently struggling. The *StrengthsQuest* text (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) can provide concrete assistance; for each of the 34 possible talent themes, the authors have listed strategies that are used by high achieving students with the described talent. For example, high achieving students with empathy (a relating strength not often viewed by students as helpful in the academic arena) have learned to read the body language and emotional expression of their professors, which

enables them to identify the issues that are likely to be on an exam. They know that the professor becomes more animated when discussing areas that she or he considers most important.

Adjustment difficulties can be approached in much the same way as other challenges. Counselors and social workers have long recognized that when clients are able to recognize the coping skills that helped them successfully resolve a problem in the past, they are more able to apply those same skills to their current difficulties (Saleebey, 1992). By focusing on a particular strength that could be applied to their current challenge and brainstorming ways of capitalizing on that strength to overcome the difficulty, advisors can help students create a manageable plan for a problem that had seemed insurmountable.

Conclusion

By proposing that strengths-based advising is a new lens through which to view students and their college experience, we are in many ways advocating a paradigm shift in higher education. This paradigm shift entails a move away from the prevailing philosophy of deficit remediation and toward one in which assessment, affirmation, and application of students' strengths pave the path to long-term success. As Kuhn (1962) noted in his classic *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, paradigm shifts result in a change of worldview, a shift in the gestalt that enables people to see circumstances differently than they had before the shift. As a result, "the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds" (Kuhn, p. 150) and transfer their allegiances only after great resistance and the passage of time. Kuhn pointed out that the realization of a new paradigm often occurs unexpectedly and is like a "conversion experience that cannot be forced" (p. 151).

With Kuhn's (1962) descriptions of paradigm shift in mind, we realize that we are proposing that advisors view the world through a new lens. Seen from the strengths perspective, a new world emerges. In this new world, the desired outcome of a college education is changed: Students acquire more than knowledge and skills; they develop and apply personal strengths that will enable them to learn and navigate throughout life. Students learn to see themselves differently and with greater confidence: as coherent selves possessing abilities that give them the capacity to adapt flexibly and succeed in new situations (Cushman & Gilford, 1999). Students also learn to see others differently, within a context of talents and uniqueness that transcends

gender and race and cannot be reduced to labels or categories. Advisors enable students to grasp a new vision of a college education that provides confidence and direction for the future, and students are equipped for the unknown complexity of a changing society by being grounded in a coherent sense of who they are and what they have to offer.

In this new world, advisors see with new eyes as well: visualizing students as already having within them the ingredients for success and viewing advising as a relationship that draws out and affirms these strengths. The nature of advising changes as advisors teach students to identify and apply their strengths to the challenges they face and work with students who are moving toward a life of integrity by fully developing and applying their talents.

In conclusion, we believe that a strengths-based approach to advising holds enormous promise for enabling students to fulfill their potential and achieve excellence in the college environment. Initial research has demonstrated the effectiveness of this approach, and research in a variety of settings has emphasized that strengths develop best within a context of supportive relationships (Clifton & Nelson, 1992). We believe the advising relationship is the best means for helping students develop strengths that translate to success in college and beyond.

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