

## Capitalizing on Personal Strengths in College

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### Abstract

This study aims to gather descriptive information about students' use of strengths using qualitative theory. Strengths programming directors nominated students based on explicit criteria. The students were interviewed on their backgrounds, strengths programs, signature strengths, strengths application, capitalizing, and benefits of capitalizing. Data indicate that college students who are the best of the best at using their strengths—the capitalizers—utilize sustained social supports and build on successful experiences that give them the confidence to apply their strengths in new situations.

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### A Focus on What Is Right With Students

Research within positive psychology focusing on strengths has expanded recently (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Buckingham & Clifton, 2001; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Rath, 2007). Gallup's Education Division conducts a major strand of strengths scholarship. Don Clifton, one of the foremost scholars in strengths research, based his studies on one simple question, "What would happen if we studied what is right with people?" (Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2005). Clifton believed that talents could be operationalized and investigated. In an attempt to better understand this concept, Gallup conducted a systematic study, interviewing over two million people in a variety of professions about their strengths. These individuals were the "best of the best" in their respective professions. The goal of these semistructured interviews was to

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gain information from excellent performers regarding what they were doing (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). It was through these interviews that the anatomy of a strength became evident.

According to Rath (2007), a strength is consistent and near perfect performance on an activity. This definition is comprised of three factors: talents or naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior; knowledge, which consists of facts and lessons learned; and skills, or the steps of an activity. These combine to create strengths. Additionally, two principles are embedded in this definition of strengths. The first is that for a talent to be labeled as a strength, there must be consistent performance of that activity, or that the strength is a predictable part of an individual's performance. Secondly, the strength does not need to be present in all aspects of an individual's life in order to excel (see Appendix A for a list of Clifton StrengthsFinder Themes). According to Buckingham and Clifton (2001), focusing solely on weaknesses is not as effective as sharpening strengths.

Within the last several years, nearly 500 colleges and universities have explored the application of strengths through the implementation of strengths-based programming. This programming attempts to identify and apply a student's individual strengths to various aspects of life (Lopez & Louis, 2009). This study investigates the student experience of developing strengths. First, we describe strengths programming and its outcomes. Then, the phenomenon of capitalizing is defined.

### **Strengths Programming on Campuses**

Organized efforts in strengths-based programming are about a decade old, and the programs vary greatly. Some of the commonalities, though, include the use of the Clifton StrengthsFinder as a measure of strengths and of StrengthsQuest (Clifton & Anderson, 2004) as a program guide. Most programs utilize trained facilitators to conduct strengths enhancing exercises. And, many programs attempt to track the potential effects of participating in a strengths-based program on academic achievement and retention. Lastly, the relationship between facilitators and students appears to be of vital importance (Lopez, Janowski, & Wells, 2004; Lopez & Louis, 2009).

From institution to institution, there are differences in the manner in which information about strengths is disseminated. Some institutions engage in didactic lectures, others embed strengths curriculum into freshmen orientation seminars, and still other schools create strengths mentoring sessions facilitated by counselors-in-training. Program leaders include varying higher education staff: counselors, psychologists, academic advisors, and faculty members.

For example, at Baylor University, a large Baptist university, students participate in a strengths-based development program, titled Chapel Friday StrengthsQuest Presentation. Freshmen who attend the summer orientation (as well as some parents) take the StrengthsFinder measure, and then when they arrive in the fall participate in the 6-week Chapel Friday curriculum. These Friday sessions, which are comprised of small groups of students, are led by trained faculty and staff. The goal of this program is to help students identify "callings" (i.e., career goals) based on students' understanding of their personal strengths. Specifically, one part of the 6-week program is a strengths session where each of the strengths is discussed in detail (Eileen Hume, personal communication, November 19, 2004).

One of the most prominent and thorough strengths development programs takes place at Lee University. Since its implementation in 2002, Lee University has utilized strengths programming among its faculty, staff, and students. University faculty and staff take the StrengthsFinder online measure and engage in either individual strengths mentoring or lunch and learn discussions. Students are introduced to their strengths in the New Student Orientation course during

their first semester at Lee University. After this, students have a variety of opportunities to explore their strengths further, including strengths-based career advising, internship classes, and senior capstone courses that reflect on students' strengths over the course of their college career and investigate how their strengths might be utilized in the future (Debby White, personal communications, October 28, 2009). Debby White, strengths development leader on the Lee University campus, reports that faculty, staff, and students use the strengths vocabulary in everyday conversation and support each other in bringing strengths to their work and their studies. In addition, she notes that their programming has progressed from identification and affirmation of strengths into the realm of development and application through internships, study abroad assignments, resume writing, and job interview preparation. Lee University has become a resource for strengths information and application for many institutions across the country.

Most studies on the outcomes of strengths-based programming are based on self-reports, or paper and pencil methods in which students are asked to reflect on their experience with the strengths programming. According to Anderson (2004), patterns of responses to open-ended questions and Likert scales concerning the benefits and influences of strengths-based programming include increased awareness of talents (knowing/understanding talents, communicating about strengths/talents, explaining successes), increased personal confidence (more confident in personal abilities, recognizing how to be a leader based on talents and strengths), increased academic confidence (utilizing strengths in academics, optimistic about academics/careers), increased motivation to achieve (identifying personal motivating factors, willingness to work for goals), increased confidence about the future (clear future goals, realistic ability scaling), increased use of talents (applying talents in academics and to personal life, coping with difficulties based on talents), developing strengths (understanding the theory of strengths development, feeling responsible to maximize personal talents), improved interpersonal understandings and relationships (noticing talents and strengths in others, communicating with others better), and other impacts of strengths awareness (valuing self, becoming more authentic).

A study conducted by Williamson (2002) with college freshmen enrolled at a private, faith-based university found similar results to those found by Anderson (2004). Students who participated in a strengths-based development group were compared with those who did not receive the strengths information. Those students in the experimental group took the StrengthsFinder assessment, and participated in two 1-hr advising sessions with trained strengths coaches. These students, at the end of the first semester, had higher grade point averages overall than students in the control group, and met the minimum standards set for first-semester students more often than students in the control group.

Additionally, narrative data from students support these benefits of strengths programming. According to Eileen Hume (personal communication, November 19, 2004), then a strengths program leader at Baylor University, students report positive outcomes as a result of participating in strengths programming. One student, after completion of the strengths program, stated: "This useful information undoubtedly has given many students on the Baylor campus a better understanding of their place in life and perhaps some prospective areas to which they may shape their academic studies."

Although recent theoretical work (Lopez & Louis, 2009) and intervention studies (Cantwell, 2005; Louis, 2008) have advanced our understanding of the strengths development program, psychologists know little about a student's strengths development experience. Descriptive information, focusing on a student's utilization of personal strengths, would enrich existing data on strengths-based education. For example, strengths programming directors frequently note those few students who, after identifying their strengths, become excited about this newfound knowledge and then build on their strengths daily. What makes these students go from the identification of personal strengths to proceed with interest and utilize these strengths in daily

life? It is from this point A, the identification of strength, to point B, the enthusiastic application of strengths, that this study aims to investigate. This journey from point A to point B, identified from this point forward as capitalizing, is defined as turning something to one's advantage (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 2003). Thus, by capitalizing on strengths, individuals turn personal strengths to personal advantage.

The capitalizing phenomenon, how an individual student goes from the identification stage of strengths information to applying strengths enthusiastically in daily life, has not been examined. Based on qualitative reports from strengths development leaders across the country, certain reoccurring ingredients appear to be important to the capitalizing framework. These include the identification of strengths, discussions in which individuals talk about their strengths, and the capacity, to build on strengths. There may be additional factors behind the capitalizing theory, but these initial characteristics will serve as the starting point for the current research endeavor.

The goal of this study was to obtain interview data from individuals who have gone through strengths development programs, and who have been nominated by programming directors to fulfill certain criteria in an attempt to create a theory of capitalizing. Due to the lack of research on the notion of capitalizing on strengths, the investigation was exploratory in nature. As such, qualitative research methods, which traditionally seek to uncover nontraditional research questions from social constructivist perspectives (Giles, 2002), were used. Specifically, we used a grounded theory approach, which holds that innovative theory is produced through concepts that are "grounded" in data, collected from participants on the basis of life experiences (Fassinger, 2005). Grounded theory requires an intertwining of research process and outcomes. The process involves the detailed, systematic but flexible interrogation of initially unstructured data selected for its close relationship to the problem under investigation. The analytical outcomes combine a demonstrable relevance and fit to the problem under investigation. According to Giles, data in grounded theory consist of transcribed interviews. These data are subjected to a continuous process of coding and categorizing known as constant comparative analysis, starting with a large set of descriptive codes that are gradually reduced to a series of analytic categories and then refined to a central or core category; the ultimate goal is to generate a set of theoretical concepts. More information on the coding process is described in the results.

## Methods

In-depth interviews were conducted with eight college students. Research participants were recruited from the Midwest/South United States through faculty and staff at colleges and universities within the Big 12 Conference utilizing strength-based programming.

These included Baylor University, Texas A&M, and the University of Oklahoma. The strengths programming directors who agreed to participate nominated students who capitalize on their personal strengths based on a set of explicit criteria. These criteria included the following: (i) the student must currently be enrolled at a college/university in which strengths development programming is being conducted, (ii) the student has participated in this programming, has identified his/her signature strengths, and can name his/her top five strengths, and (iii) the student has identified one area within his/her life (social, academic, occupational) in which he/she actively applies his/her strengths.

These nominated students were contacted by email, and were explained the main objectives of the study, the time commitment needed, and issues related to confidentiality. Once the individuals agreed to participate, they were sent consent forms; they were asked to sign the consent form and return it to this primary author via mail. Once the consent form was received,

TABLE 1. Demographic Information of Participants.

Category	N	%
<b>Age</b>		
19	2	25
20	3	37.5
21	1	12.5
22	1	12.5
23	1	12.5
<b>Year in school</b>		
Sophomore	4	50
Junior	1	12.5
Senior	2	25
Graduate school	1	12.5
<b>Gender</b>		
Male	4	50
Female	4	50
<b>Ethnicity</b>		
Caucasian	7	87.5
Hispanic	1	12.5

the primary author contacted the participant and set up a time to conduct the initial phone interview. Demographic information is summarized in Table 1. The ages of the students range from 19 to 23 with a mean age of 20.5. They range in year from sophomore to graduate school. Four of the participants were male and four were female. In terms of ethnic background, 87.5% (7/8) of the participants identified themselves with Caucasian ethnicity, while 12.5% (1/8) identified herself as Hispanic.

The interviews were semistructured and questions were open-ended in order to promote discussion. Morrow and Smith (2000) detail the importance of open-ended interview questions to encourage participants to tell their story in their own words. Therefore, broad categories of discussion topics were included: basic background/demographics, description of the completed strengths development program, identification of signature strengths, application of strengths in life, capitalizing, and perceived benefits of capitalizing (see Appendix B).

### Data Analysis

After all interviews had been conducted and the texts of each transcribed, the primary author and a fellow graduate student reviewed the data. Working independently, each researcher selected segments of text that were seen as relevant to the basic concerns of the study. In grounded theory research, the coding process is quite elaborate. Traditional coding methods involve three steps: text-driven coding, sensitizing, and selective coding. Specifically, text-driven coding involves the breaking down of data into units of meaning. The second level of coding, termed sensitizing, examines the relationships between data. And finally, selective coding involves examining the resulting data to create constructs making up a theory (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Therefore, in this research study, the coding of data involved moving from the lowest level of data (the raw text of interviewees) to the highest level of data (a theory). To accomplish

TABLE 2. Theoretical Constructs, Sensitizing Concepts, and Text-based Categories.

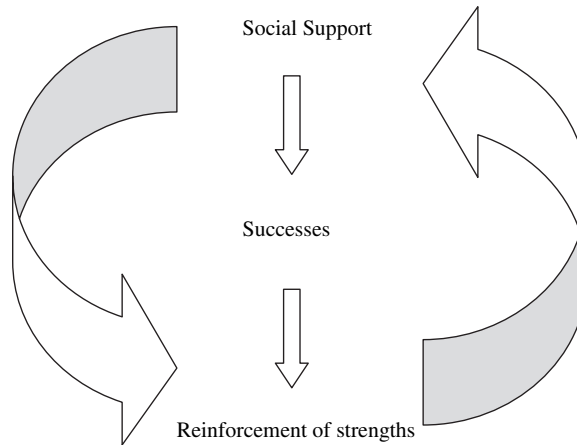
I. Background of consistent support	
A. <i>Praising their traditional upbringing</i>	87.5%
1. My parents are still happily married	
2. My community was a stable environment for me	
3. My mom is supermom	
B. <i>I have many supports in my life</i>	100%
1. My parents are always there for me	
2. My friends support my life decisions	
C. <i>Spirituality is important to me</i>	100%
1. Spirituality is the strongest source of support for me	
2. My church/spirituality helps define who I am	
II. I have experienced success in life	
A. <i>I have success in academic settings</i>	75%
1. I am active in school activities	
2. I am a student leader	
3. School is fun; I like school	
4. I have always met/exceeded my academic goals	
III. I have accepted my strengths because I am reinforced by them	
A. <i>Strengths as integral to personal identity</i>	87.5%
1. I thought "Oh yea, that sounds like me"	
2. Other people said "that is so you"	
3. I live my strengths because that is who I am	
B. <i>Strengths are useful to me</i>	100%
1. Strengths help me understand others	
2. I understand myself through my strengths	
3. It is helpful to know what you are good at, as opposed to what you are not	
4. I feel more confident using my strengths	

*Note.* Percentages indicate the portion of participants who made similar statements and/or used similar phrases as those in the table.

this, transcribed interview data of the interviewees were examined by both the primary author and an additional external auditor. Relevant texts were highlighted and copied to a separate form again by this primary auditor and the external auditor. These relevant texts were discussed by the two coders and agreed upon. These relevant texts then make up the text-driven coding categories. Following this, the relevant text of each interviewee was compared to the other interviewees' relevant text by both coders and, as a result, repeating ideas emerged. This step represents sensitizing data collection. Finally, the repeating ideas were examined by the primary author and the external auditor and discussed. This resulted in overarching themes or theoretical constructs (see Table 2), and ultimately in a theory.

Based on the data, three constructs appear to be necessary for the capitalizing process to occur: continual social support, experiences of success, and reinforcement of personal strengths. Although it might appear as if these three constructs reflect processes that occur sequentially, or are in linear relation to each other, actually these ideas represent phenomena that are interrelated, overlapping, and circular (see Figure 1). This figure illustrates the equal value held by each of the theoretical constructs, social support, successes, and the reinforcement of individual strengths. It is through the ongoing and cyclical relationship of these constructs that capitalizing may be achieved.

FIGURE 1. Theoretical Constructs.



### Results and Discussion

The importance of a continual source of social support in the theory of capitalizing reinforces a basic idea from which applied psychologists operate: Increased social support positively correlates with healthy mental health (Snyder & Lopez, 2002). The construct of social support has been studied in a variety of contexts within psychology since the birth of applied psychology. The difference with this study, however, is the manner in which the students define the construct of social support. Social support for these college students comes from three primary sources: family, friends, and their church. These college students felt that they had supportive individuals in their life and that these supportive individuals provided a foundation for them. The college students interviewed utilized these supportive individuals in their daily functioning, felt that these individuals served as role models in their lives, and were therefore shaped by their presence.

For example, one student noted that he had multiple social supports:

I've been really lucky. I've had a lot of social support. Whether it be from people in my church, the church body really supporting me, or in school, I always had a lot of support coming from teachers. And being in a small town, I mean, everyone in the community knows who everyone is, and so everyone kind of holds everyone accountable. It's a big family-type atmosphere, for the most part, and so I've received probably more support, you know, from the surrounding community than would be average across the rest of the U.S.

Another student discussed the importance of her family as a source of social support: "My family is a huge support system. My parents and my sister are my best friends." The staple with all of the interviewees was the positive affect attached to these support systems. All of the students who were interviewed expressed positive emotions associated with the supportive individuals. The effects of these positive emotions may be explained through Frederickson's (2002) *broaden-and-build theory*.

This theory holds that positive emotions appear to broaden people's thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources. Positive emotions tend to widen the variety of thoughts and actions that come to mind. Experiments in which positive emotions were

induced among participants support this. For example, joy and contentment produced more thought–action repertoire responses than negatively induced emotions such as fear and anger (Frederickson & Branigan, 2005). Through their broadening effects, these positive emotions build people’s enduring personal resources. Using this framework, the possible positive emotions gained by individuals through the identification of strengths may enable these individuals to broaden their utilization of strengths in an enthusiastic manner. It could be understood, then, that the college students felt supported and encouraged by their parents, friends, and churches, and that support induced positive affect. The positive affect then allowed the college students to be open to new ideas, activities, and additional resources.

Experiences of success are also important in the process of capitalizing. Success can be defined in many ways. As a construct in this study, students defined it related to experiences in their lives associated with academic and extracurricular tasks. The majority of the college students expressed leadership skills in sports, clubs, and campus programming and reported enjoyment in these activities. One student in particular described the joy he got from his involvement: “I’m involved in student government here on Baylor campus. I’m a codirector of the Freshman Life counsel. I am in a fraternity. I just really like to be active in the university community.”

In addition, the college students felt as if they were meeting their academic goals, and these goals tended to be high (e.g., a GPA of 3.7). Indeed, one student who reported her GPA as a 3.97 stated: “I came in with a ‘I am going to get a 4.0 all the time’ kind of attitude and have almost maintained that with the exception of one class. But with that one class, I knew I worked my hardest, and I didn’t have any regrets. I feel like I have met my goals.”

The portion of these successes that is goal driven may be explained through a goal-oriented motivational theory such as Snyder’s *hope theory* (1994). Hope theory begins with the assumption that human actions are goal directed (Snyder, Rand, & Sigmon, 2002). Goals may be short term or long term and are of sufficient value to occupy conscious thought. In order to reach goals, individuals must generate routes (pathways) to those goals and have the perceived capacity to initiate movement (agency) toward their goals. This theory posits that positive emotions should flow from perceptions of successful goal pursuit (Snyder et al., 2002). As such, students who leverage strengths and are successful in goal pursuits may be able to generate a greater number of pathways and adequate agency, ultimately allowing them greater goal achievement.

Finally, students reported feeling reinforced by their strengths, which allowed them to utilize them frequently and with the confidence that they were useful. All the college students identified benefit from using their strengths.

One student noted one such benefit: “I think it gives me a confidence boost that there are things I am good at.”

A second student reported a similar sentiment:

I think that there are certain things that I’m just not good at. So, instead of me spending all my time trying to work on that and improve that, it’s much more effective and much more beneficial for me to go and use what I’m good at to excel in that area, instead of trying to bring everything up to par. Taking those things that are already above par and excelling at those are, in the long run, much more beneficial. And so I have seen that by using that, that will help me excel in those areas throughout the rest of my life.

It was through these benefits that students were reinforced to continually utilize their strengths in a variety of domains. Moreover, because the college students interviewed had positive experiences with their personal strengths, their expectancy beliefs may be stable. *Self-efficacy theory*, which centers on people’s beliefs in their abilities to produce desired effects (Bandura, 1977), maintains that expectancy beliefs are the most important determinants of the behaviors individuals choose to engage in and the amount of effort exerted (Maddux, 2002). These expectancy



beliefs develop over the life-span through performance experiences, vicarious experiences, imaginal experiences, verbal persuasions, and physiological and emotional states.

This theory maintains that when equipped with a strong belief in one's capacity for achievement, there are little limits to what can be accomplished. If a student has a solid foundation of positive experiences, and positive expectancy beliefs as a result, he/she will likely be highly confident and able to try and put strengths knowledge to use. Therefore, self-efficacy may play a role in students' application of strengths, such that students with high self-efficacy may be more confident and enthusiastic about capitalizing on their strengths.

As previously stated, it is evident that the interview data support the three theoretical constructs, indicating that these college students have capitalized on their strengths through continual social support, experiences of success, and being reinforced by their strengths. It appears important to continue to examine hope theory, self-efficacy theory, and positive psychological theories similar to the broaden-and-build theory to better understand the capitalizing phenomenon. In addition, it may be helpful for future researchers to examine career development theory as it relates to students capitalizing on their strengths. Specifically, narrative career theory (Savickas, 1997) is concerned with how individuals understand and develop career behavior through personal meaning. In this regard, students can be encouraged to explore how they have used their strengths throughout their lives as a way to understand their signature strengths more fully and apply them to academic majors and future career endeavors.

Future research may seek to conduct similar studies to provide support for the current theory or to identify additional important factors. The current study utilized qualitative research to gather rich, contextual data in order to understand the student's stories of capitalizing. As research on capitalizing is still in the infancy stages, future research may wish to utilize similar methodology, and to include quantitative measures of strengths utilization and/or personality constructs that may be related.

Moreover, positive psychologists in conjunction with strengths programming directors could further investigate their strengths programs to evaluate these factors of support, successes, and reinforcement of strengths as well as other factors to determine which factors are useful to their students participating in such programs.

From a college development standpoint, it seems important for strengths programming leaders to examine whether these factors exist in their students' lives, and to lend resources to help support their students, create opportunities for successes, and reinforce their personal strengths so that the students will in turn capitalize on their strengths. These resources may include mentoring (support), encouraging the student to get involved in academic/extracurricular activities that utilize their strengths (success), and holding one-on-one or group strengths sessions with students to discuss how they use their strengths currently and ways in which they might use them in the future (reinforce).

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## APPENDIX A

### Clifton StrengthsFinder Themes

Achiever	Inclusiveness
Activator	Individuation
Adaptability	Input
Analytical	Intellection
Arranger	Learner
Belief	Maximizer
Command	Positivity
Communicator	Relator
Competition	Responsibility
Connectedness	Restorative
Consistency	Self-assurance
Context	Significance
Deliberative	Strategic
Developer	WOO
Discipline	
Empathy	
Focus	
Futuristic	
Harmony	
Ideation	

## APPENDIX B

### Semistructured Interview

Broad Topic Areas:

1. Basic background/demographics
2. Description of completed strengths development program
3. Signature strengths
4. Area/s within life in which student actively utilizes strengths
5. How does the student capitalize/benefits of capitalizing