

DISSERTATION

EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS  
WITH STRENGTHS-BASED DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### EXPLORING THE PERCEPTIONS OF FIRST-GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS WITH STRENGTHS-BASED DEVELOPMENT EXPERIENCES

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore perceptions of first-generation college students with strengths-based development experiences. *Strengths-based development experiences* were defined as those that leveraged a student's results from the CliftonStrengths® assessment provided by the Gallup Organization. This study used a phenomenological approach designed to illuminate the shared experience the participants had when engaging in strengths-based development. Seven first-generation college students from three 4-year public colleges participated in this interview-based study.

Results showed that each student embarked on a strengths-based development journey unique to them, but all experienced a similar phenomenon. These first-generation college students experienced personal self-discovery and validation of what makes them unique through strengths-based development. Participants' journeys were expanded and confirmed by individuals and communities also on their own personal strengths-based journeys. These experiences and relationships ultimately led participants to an active and conscious application of talent in all aspects of their collegiate life. Intersection with others involved in strengths-based development, whether students, staff, faculty, or community members, was a critical component in the phenomenon. Without such experiences, the phenomenon would have been unlikely to occur.

Description of the phenomenon was supported by five superordinate themes with two subordinate themes for each. These superordinate themes were (a) It's Just Natural for Me containing the subordinate themes of Like a Bear Hug and Understanding Increases Over Time, (b) With Whom I Spend My Time containing the subordinate themes of This Is Who I Am and Finding the Right Partners, (c) Leveraging My Strengths containing the subordinate themes of Confidence to Step Up and Recommended to Apply, (d) Helped Me Along My Path containing the subordinate themes of Confirm or Adjust and Supported by Coaching, and (e) Finding Community Through Strengths containing the subordinate themes of Campus Communities and Beyond the Campus Boundaries.

This research is the first study to explore strengths-based development experiences through the lens of first-generation college students. It extends existing research into a unique and important population of students on college campuses. This research provides meaningful suggestions for practice by higher education administrators when utilizing the CliftonStrengths® assessment with first-generation college students. This research provides suggestions for higher education administrators considering bringing CliftonStrengths to their campus. Topics for future research are also included to expand the scope of the use of CliftonStrengths on college campuses.

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While I generally describe the use of my own Top 5 CliftonStrengths® talent theme of Command as accomplishing things through sheer force of will, it is abundantly clear to me that this dissertation would never have been completed without the loving and dedicated support of many special individuals.

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true today. You make me better by your presence in my life, my life is only excellent with you as a part of it. Without you, this journey would have been impossible.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated in loving memory of my grandmother, Esther Lerer (1925-2020)—wife, mother, grandmother, great-grandmother, and the original sheer force of will in our family.



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## DEFINITION OF TERMS

*CliftonStrengths® assessment:* The CliftonStrengths assessment, owned by The Gallup Organization and originally called the Clifton StrengthsFinder, is “an online assessment of personal talent that identifies areas in which an individual has the greatest potential for building strengths” (Asplund et al., 2014, p. 1).

*Coaching:* The act of “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential. The process of coaching often unlocks previously untapped sources of imagination, productivity and leadership” (International Coaching Federation, 2021, What is Coaching section, para. 1).

*First-generation college student:* A college student whose parents did not attend college (Cataldi et al., 2018; Ishitani, 2006).

*Gatekeepers:* Individuals at data collection sites who provided access to potential study participants (Lavrakas, 2008).

*Junior student:* A student who has between 60 and 89 semester credit hours (Colorado State University, n.d.).

*Positive psychology:* Positive psychology is a focus in scientific psychological practice on what is right with people and what strengths they possess. It is intended to “complement and extend the problem-focused psychology that has been dominant for many decades” (Lopez & Snyder, 2009, p. xxiii).

*Senior student:* A student who has 90 or more semester credit hours (Colorado State University, n.d.).

*Strength:* A strength within the context of strengths-based development is a natural talent developed to where an individual has “the ability to consistently provide near-perfect performance” (Rath, 2007, p. 42).

*Strengths-based development:* The act of investing time and energy into developing identified top CliftonStrengths® themes through various interventions and self-reflection activities (Asplund et al., 2014).

*Talent:* A talent within the context of strengths-based development is “a natural way of thinking, feeling, or behaving” (Rath, 2007, p. 42).

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

First-generation college students are a sizable and important population in higher education. The term *first-generation college student* is defined in multiple ways. In this study, I define the term as students with neither parent having attended college (Cataldi et al., 2018; Ishitani, 2006). Data from the National Center for Education Statistics indicated 34% of all college students were first-generation in 2011-2012 (Skomsvold, 2014). First-generation college students are a population of college attendees with considerable barriers in their access to and persistence through higher education. These barriers include less parental support because their parents do not have knowledge and experience in attending university, lower rates of college preparedness in terms of college preparatory classes, and feelings of disconnection from both their families and their campus community (Azmitia et al., 2018; Cataldi et al., 2018; Skomsvold, 2014).

Nationally, students of color are more likely to be first generation as compared to White students, and women are slightly more likely to be first generation. The percentage of first-generation students also increases as family income decreases. When family income was below \$20,000 per year, 28.8% students identified as having parents with a high school diploma or less as compared to 10.5% of students with a family income above \$100,000 per year (Saenz et al., 2007; Skomsvold, 2014).

Lack of family knowledge and other barriers may be contributing factors as to why first-generation college students are more likely to leave their campuses and take longer to graduate than their counterparts (Ishitani, 2006). Therefore, it is critical to study and understand

experiences and perceptions of first-generation college students to better serve this student population on campuses across the country.

College administrators responded to perceived barriers of first-generation college students by creating programs and services to identify deficits that first-generation college students possess and bring with them to college. Administrators then created programs designed to focus on those deficits to help first-generation college students succeed. Examples of such programs are assessments used to place students in required study skills, reading comprehension, or time management classes, which add to the workload of an already difficult environment (Anderson, 2005). Multiple authors problematize this method of intervention and believe use of deficit thinking may create difficulty for students; introduce stereotypes; and create low expectations, alienation, and labeling (Anderson, 2005; Smit, 2012). Smit (2012) stated:

One of the most serious effects of deficit thinking is that it strengthens stereotypes in the minds and thoughts of educators, policy makers and students themselves. In essence, deficit thinking allows generalizations about student ability to be made and supports a laziness to grapple with the complex issues around student difficulties. In the process, people who are already disenfranchised are labelled and further stigmatized. (p. 372)

A growing number of researchers and college administrators contend an added focus on personal strengths could help students become engaged in learning and thrive in their college experience (Schreiner, 2015; Shushok & Hulme, 2006; Williams et al., 2018). Shushok and Hulme (2006) suggested even though remediation programs have their place in higher education, educators and researchers should devote equal time to understanding parts of individuals that help them succeed. In this study, I sought to devote such time in my exploration of strengths-based experiences of first-generation college students.



## **Positive Psychology as Asset-Based Philosophy**

Asset-based programs grew from the field of positive psychology. Though the concepts of focusing on positive aspects of personality have been presented in the past (Maslow, 1970), Martin Seligman, former president of the American Psychological Association, championed positive psychology as a continued response to the illness ideology of the psychological community (Maddux, 2005). Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) argued the advent of the Veterans Administration and the National Institute of Mental Health in the 1940s led to an almost complete focus on curing mental illness and, in turn, neglected the overarching charge to the psychological community of enriching human life. Since that time, clinical psychology has been situated in the broader context of the medical world, using terms such as diagnose, disease, and treatment to “emphasize abnormality over normality, maladjustment over adjustment, and sickness over health” (Maddux, 2005, p. 14). This focus on the negative leaves a gap in practice, which practitioners of positive psychology hope to fill.

After reviewing research on negative bias and environmental influence over psychological wellbeing, Wright and Lopez (2005) suggested diagnostic focus should include human strengths and environmental resources that aid in human flourishing. Wright and Lopez said:

Highlighting positives as well as negatives in both the person and the environment serves vital purposes. It provides a framework to counteract deindividuation. It affects the significance of the negatives and enlarges remediation possibilities. It also encourages the discovery of assets and resources that can be developed in serving human potential. (p. 37)

Relating these ideas to first-generation college students, it is possible that if college administrators and educators only focus on first-generation students’ perceived deficits, they may believe they cannot succeed in college. Positive psychologists seek to augment deficit thinking

by exploring and examining those who are flourishing and ways to build health rather than focusing on and treating disorder (Snyder & Lopez, 2005). The theory focuses on positive emotions and character strengths (Azar, 2011).

At its core, positive psychology “is about valued subjective experiences: well-being, contentment, and satisfaction (in the past); hope and optimism (for the future); and flow and happiness (in the present)” (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p. 5). Positive psychology and the ideas of human flourishing relate directly to the goals of higher education of helping students learn and grow from their first year until graduation (Lopez, n.d.). By identifying, focusing on, and amplifying strengths in these students, higher education practitioners might be able to help first-generation college students thrive.

### **Purpose of the Study**

My purpose for this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore perceptions of first-generation college students who have experience with strengths-based development. I examined strengths-based development experiences initiated using the CliftonStrengths® assessment offered by the Gallup Organization.

### **Research Questions**

My central guiding research question was “What are the experiences of first-generation college students at 4-year public colleges with strengths-based development?”

I also explored the following sub-questions:

1. What are the perceptions of first-generation college students of their results from the CliftonStrengths® assessment?
2. How do first-generation college students use their CliftonStrengths® assessment results in their collegiate experience?

3. What perceptions do first-generation college students have of the impact of strengths-based one-on-one coaching on their collegiate experience?
4. How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of various intervention activities (e.g. classroom-based experiences, first-year seminars, workshops, and group activities) using CliftonStrengths® results on their collegiate experience?
5. How do first-generation college students use informal social interactions to aid in their strengths-based development?
6. How do first-generation college students perceive participation in strengths-based development helping them accomplish goals or succeeding in college?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I used a conceptual framework based in strengths-based development. In this study, the strengths-based development process was initiated by completion of the CliftonStrengths® assessment and then continued through various interventions, including coaching, classroom activities, and group workshops. The CliftonStrengths assessment was created by Dr. Donald Clifton. He was issued a presidential commendation by the American Psychological Association, recognizing him as the “father of strengths-based psychology and the grandfather of positive psychology” (McKay & Greengrass, 2003, p. 87). Clifton based his research in the field of positive psychology, asking the question, “What would happen if we studied what is right with people, instead of fixating on what is wrong with them?” (Gallup, Inc., 2021a). It is that question which frames the philosophy of strengths-based development today.

Created in 1999, over 25 million people worldwide have completed the assessment (Gallup, Inc., 2021a). The assessment consists of 177 questions and results in a theme sequence consisting of 34 themes. Depending on the level of report purchased, individuals receive their

Top 5 talent themes or their entire theme sequence in order of highest strength to lowest. Gallup, a global analytics and advice firm that owns and distributes the CliftonStrengths® assessment, publishes and maintains the names and definitions of the 34 themes online (Gallup, Inc., 2021b). Researchers have rigorously studied the assessment through multiple quantitative studies to prove its validity and reliability as an assessment tool (Asplund et al., 2014). The assessment is available globally in over 25 languages. These results suggest broad applicability in a variety of cultures and populations of students represented on college campuses, including first-generation college students. The high degree of internal consistency is why multiple sectors use the CliftonStrengths assessment, including higher education (Gallup, Inc., 2021c).

I did not examine the validity or reliability of the results of the assessment in this study nor did I administer the instrument itself to participants during the study. Rather, I explored the perceptions of first-generation college students in relation to their experience understanding their assessment results and perceived impact of strengths-based interventions in their collegiate experience. College educators use the CliftonStrengths® assessment in many different types of interventions, such as one-on-one coaching, strengths-based advising, 1st-year seminars, group workshops, and leadership development. In this study, I interviewed junior and senior first-generation college students at 4-year public colleges to illuminate their experiences over time with strengths-based development and the various interventions therein. Using the results, I hope to inform the practice of higher education administrators who have existing programs utilizing the CliftonStrengths assessment on their campuses and those who are considering use of the CliftonStrengths assessment and strengths-based development programs in the future.

## **Delimitations**

This study had the following delimitations. First, I focused solely on first-generation college students to accurately understand the experiences of this sizable population. Second, I required participants to be between 19 and 23 years of age, junior or senior status, have completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment, and have participated in at least one intervention activity on their campus. These selection criteria ensured participants had enough experience with the phenomenon to provide meaningful interviews. I chose the age range because students outside of this range could have mitigating life experiences beyond the scope of this study (Bean & Metzner, 1985). Third, campuses must use the CliftonStrengths assessment and have at least one intervention program in place at the time of the study to be selected. These campus selection criteria ensured selected sites had a robust program, which provided the depth of experience for students necessary to understand the phenomenon of strengths-based development.

## **Assumptions and Limitations**

I had several assumptions for this study. I assumed students who volunteered after being notified by campus staff had a sincere interest in the topic and research study. Additionally, I assumed participants had enough experience with CliftonStrengths® assessment results and strengths-based development that their interviews provided in-depth information about the phenomenon. Finally, as it was not a part of my study protocol, I assumed participants were not receiving special credit on their campuses for participating in the study.

Due to the nature of qualitative research, this study had multiple limitations. First, I focused on three 4-year public colleges, and, though the results may provide useful information about the experiences of first-generation college students using strengths-based development, results will need to be confirmed in additional studies. Second, I only included first-generation

college students between the ages of 19-23 in this study and had seven participants. This sample adds to the understanding of the phenomenon but is not generalizable to the greater population. Third, participants spent considerable time engaging in their development to participate in the study, which may not make them representative of the larger population. Fourth, I limited the research to strengths-based development that occurred in concert with the results of the CliftonStrengths® assessment. Other tools and assessments could be researched in relation to strengths-based development and may have different results. Finally, I conducted interviews during a specific point in time in the lives of the students. It will be challenging to understand change over time in relation to their work with strengths-based development; nonetheless, the data gathered provide a good foundation for future study and can be used as descriptive results about the process of strengths-based development.

One unanticipated limitation was that my research was conducted throughout a significant portion of the COVID-19 pandemic. My research proposal was approved by the Institutional Research Board (IRB) at Colorado State University in March of 2020 (see Appendix A) amid stay-at-home orders across the United States and virtual instruction for all three study sites. I recruited and interviewed participants between May and November of 2020. While interviews were already planned to be virtual over the Zoom platform, the nature of the pandemic cancelled, limited, or significantly modified many of the strengths-based programs at each study site.

Recruitment was also impacted, both in number of interview participants and length of time between the first interview and the focus group. I was only able to interview seven students instead of the proposed 12, and one study site was only able to recruit one participant. It is likely that the high stress and complexity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic limited students'

capacity to engage in my research. It is also likely that first-generation college students were particularly impacted, making recruitment for this study more difficult. This limited my ability to do a full analysis of each study site individually prior to an analysis of all participants. Finally, only four interview participants attended the focus group, and the final participant was interviewed after the focus group was completed so his data were used to add detail to existing themes.

### **Significance of the Study**

If first-generation college students are a large population of students on college campuses and research shows they need support to be successful, it is imperative we explore intervention activities that may support them in their college experience (Azmitia et al., 2018; Ishitani, 2006). Much of the research is focused on fixing perceived deficits in these students. This study could demonstrate a supplemental way to support first-generation college students. The descriptive findings from this study illustrate a perception from seven first-generation college students that participation in strengths-based development supported their development and success in college. Higher education administrators may be encouraged by these results to think about new ways to supplement support structures for first-generation college students on their campuses.

Specifically, I hope to inform practice of higher education administrators who use the CliftonStrengths® assessment on their campuses. This could be individuals who work directly with first-generation college students in support roles or those who work in programs that connect with these students throughout their time on campus, such as orientation, leadership development, residence life, or mentor programs. Additionally, higher education administrators looking to incorporate a strengths-based development program on their campus could use this research in determining why and how they might intentionally include first-generation college

students in such a program. Each campus studied leverages the CliftonStrengths assessment in different ways and at different times; therefore, this study provides a robust narrative of the perception of first-generation college students as to how each method affected their collegiate experience.

Over 1000 colleges and universities use The CliftonStrengths® assessment with over 700,000 assessments distributed annually (Gallup, Inc., 2021c). Approximately 3 million access codes had been distributed and used by students as of November 2016 (Gallup, Inc., 2016). The cost of those codes to higher education is over \$30 million, with use and cost increasing annually. Given this cost, it is critical that strengths-based development be explored in all facets of the university to maximize investment of resources. Additionally, some researchers argue that merely identifying talent and strengths without developmental activities may contribute to the development of a fixed mindset in students, which may limit their growth aspirations (Louis, 2011). A *fixed mindset* is described as a viewpoint that talent, intelligence, and abilities are unchangeable, while a *growth mindset* is described as a viewpoint that talent, intelligence, and abilities can be developed over time (Dweck, 2007). Participation in a program focused on strengths-based development may create or reinforce a growth mindset. Though I am not exploring what happens to students who receive CliftonStrengths results and no follow-up interventions in this study, it is helpful to better understand the perceptions of first-generation college students who actively engage in strengths-based development.

In this qualitative phenomenological study, I aimed to add to the body of research by understanding how first-generation college students experience strengths-based development. To date, few researchers have explored a specific demographic of students. None have studied first-



generation college students; therefore, this research is unique and will fill a gap in the literature in the research of higher education.

### **Researcher's Positionality**

As a non-first-generation college student, my research perspective has grown over time through my experience working at college campuses with high percentages of first-generation college students and through my work as a Gallup Certified CliftonStrengths® Coach. For 10 years, I worked at two campuses where most undergraduate students were the first in their families to attend a university. This experience led me to explore ways that higher education administrators could create practices that focused on student assets and strengths, rather than deficits.

Through this exploration, I found the CliftonStrengths® assessment, participated in numerous trainings to become a certified coach, and began to integrate practice into my work at the leadership center on a college campus. While working at campuses with a high percentage of first-generation students, I participated in many 1st-year seminar classes and conduct cases where the focus was on fixing perceived deficits in these students; however, in the leadership center, I witnessed tremendous growth in students as we used strengths-based development in our educational curriculum. This experience added to my belief that additional focus on student assets and strengths across the campus may help first-generation students succeed in college and their future careers. Additionally, use of the CliftonStrengths assessment and strengths-based development was increasing on college campuses around the country, so it became important to me to better understand if the time and resources spent on strengths-based programs were worthwhile pursuits.

Clearly, as a leadership educator, Certified CliftonStrengths® Coach, and someone who genuinely believes in asset- and strengths-based development, I have a positive personal bias toward the CliftonStrengths assessment and an ongoing informal relationship with the Gallup organization. It is important to name my bias plainly in this work so I can be objective in the research and ensure the trustworthiness of the data. Recognizing that these biases and experiences will be ever present in this research, it will be critical to position the voices of the students in the forefront of the study and interpret their voices both individually and collectively in relation to the phenomenon of strengths-based development.

## CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Asset-based development is the concept that the positive attributes, strengths, and abilities of individuals should receive focus as educators explore areas of personal development and psychological well-being. A focus on assets and strengths in college, grounded in the field of positive psychology, adds an additional narrative to existing deficit approaches in which educators identify and attempt to remedy students' deficits through remedial classes, tutoring, or college adjustment training. In this literature analysis, I first explore the growth and ideas of positive psychology and advent of strengths-based development. Next, I examine strengths-based development through critical studies involving use of the CliftonStrengths® assessment in higher education. Finally, I explore research of first-generation college students, a population of students who might benefit from participation in strengths-based development activities.

### **Positive Psychology**

Positive psychology as a movement and concept focuses on the positive aspects of individuals to help them thrive. Sheldon et al. (2000) stated, "The positive psychology movement represents a new commitment on the part of the research psychologists to focus attention upon the sources of psychological health, thereby going beyond prior emphases upon disease and disorder" (p. 2). Psychologists help people grow, use their strengths, and increase well-being by studying the positive aspects of people (Lopez & Gallagher, 2009). Lopez and Gallagher (2009) discussed a need for positive psychology theories to be supported by critical research. While it is important to state that a focus on positivity helps individuals thrive, researchers must also provide effective methods for use in practice.

A major tenant of positive psychology is that positivity and happiness can be increased through intervention (Drozd et al., 2014). In the first large study to assess positive psychology interventions, Seligman et al. (2005) tested various interventions to explore if this tenant was indeed accurate. They evaluated the impact of five positive psychology interventions on happiness and depression measures over a 6-month period. The researchers collected data online through a randomized, controlled trial of 577 adults (42% male and 58% female; 77% White and 23% Black, Indigenous, or people of color). Participants completed the Steen Happiness Index and Beck Depression Inventory and participated in one of six intervention exercises (*gratitude visit, three good things, you at your best, using signature strengths, identifying signature strengths*, and a placebo) for a week (Seligman et al., 2005). Participants then repeated the two assessments at 1 week, 3 months, and 6 months post intervention.

Results showed all interventions had immediate effects on happiness and depression, but those effects wore off quickly for the placebo and over time for the *gratitude visit, you at your best*, and *identifying signature strengths* interventions. The *three good things* and *using signature strengths* interventions showed continued positive effects in assessments 6 months post intervention with medium-to-large effect sizes. Findings showed specific positive psychology interventions may have potential to influence happiness over a period of time (Seligman et al., 2005). The significance of this study is two-part. First, some specific positive interventions may be useful. Second, there is support for the idea that one must use, and not just know, your strengths to see lasting results. Bridges et al. (2012) used the results and successful interventions of Seligman et al. (2005) as part of their justification for integrating positive psychology interventions into courses. They intended to use these interventions to improve student learning about concepts of positive psychology.

In a follow-up study 7 years later, Gander et al. (2012) attempted to replicate and expand the results of Seligman et al. (2005). Their study involved 1,598 participants, with 622 participants completing all four follow-up assessments. Researchers split 1,598 participants into 10 groups, nine experimental groups and one placebo. Participants completed the Authentic Happiness Index and Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale and then participated in one of 10 exercises (nine interventions, one placebo) for a week. Participants repeated the two assessments 1 week, 3 months, and 6 months post intervention. Results showed only the *using signature strengths* intervention led to statistically significant results in happiness after 6 months ( $F[1, 134] = 6.16, p < .05, \eta^2 = .04$ ) and depression ( $F[1, 134] = 3.46, p < .05, \eta^2 = .03$ ; Gander et al., 2012). While effect sizes are small and the sample was 95.6% women, it is interesting to my research that strengths-based interventions appear to be a promising longitudinal method of developing well-being in two separate studies.

Continuing the narrative of strengths-based interventions in positive psychology, Cheavens et al. (2012) compared the effect of capitalization (i.e., asset) and compensation (i.e., deficit) strategies on symptoms in patients diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder. The 34-person experimental design study on psychotherapy treatments examined the rate of change in depressive symptoms over 16 weeks in groups assigned to either capitalization or compensation activities and therapies. Results of the hierarchical linear model showed participants in the capitalization group reported a significantly larger decrease in depressive symptoms than those in the compensation group ( $t(31.4) = 2.21, p = .03, d = .69$ ; Cheavens et al., 2012). Results suggested that, although both strategies of intervention might help reduce major depressive symptoms, a focus on capitalization may reduce these symptoms at a greater rate over time. Unfortunately, while the results suggest the need to focus on positive assets, the study's small

sample size makes results difficult to generalize without replication to increase validity.

Additionally, the researchers attempted to complete a 12-month follow-up, but few people participated.

Wood et al. (2011) added additional evidence to the idea of using strengths to positively impact happiness by exploring the impact of strengths on overall well-being. Participants in this correlational study completed the strengths use scale, positive and negative affect scales, perceived stress scale, self-esteem scale, and vitality scale three times over 6 months. After 227 participants completed the study, Wood et al. (2011) used multiple regression analysis to determine if the initial strengths use scale scores could predict changes in the other measures.

Results showed individuals' initial measure of the strengths use scale was related to a decrease in stress and an increase in self-esteem, vitality, and positive affect at both the 3-month and 6-month follow-up assessments ( $p < .05$ ; Wood et al., 2011). While specific strengths interventions are discussed later in this chapter, it is important to note this relationship between general strengths use, positive psychology, happiness, and well-being. Further research could determine precisely what types of strengths use are most valuable in the pursuit of increased well-being.

Higher education and student affairs practitioners can use positive psychology to develop student well-being and help students become more engaged on their campus. Mather (2010) posited that a focus on positive psychology can help nurture positive emotions, such as happiness, gratitude, and hope, which can be leveraged in campus culture and student organizations for meaningful goal creation and completion. By doing so, student involvement and engagement may increase, which may support positive student outcomes (Astin, 1984; Kuh et al., 2010). Within positive psychology, numerous researchers attempt to explain ways to

increase positive emotions and human flourishing (e.g., Cheavens et al., 2012; Mather, 2010). In the next section, I explore strengths-based development, a theory used at many colleges and universities to develop asset-based interventions for students.

### **Strengths-Based Development**

*Strengths-based development* is an asset-based concept grounded in the idea that human beings can thrive if personal strengths are identified, enhanced, and used effectively in life. There are a growing number of assessments and tools to identify individual talents and strengths to support strengths-based development, including the CliftonStrengths® assessment. Used by over 25 million individuals, the CliftonStrengths assessment was created under the leadership of Dr. Donald Clifton and designed to identify strengths and talents in individuals for productive application (Gallup, Inc., 2021a).

Originally called the Clifton Strengthsfinder assessment, the CliftonStrengths® assessment was created from over two million qualitative interviews conducted by analysts in the Gallup organization (Asplund et al., 2014). Semi-structured interviews were primarily based in Clifton's two major beliefs that talents could be studied and capitalized on by individuals, and success is a combination of both talent and intelligence. The researchers analyzed the interviews to create an objective measure of talent themes in individuals.

The first assessment was launched in 1999 and has undergone several revisions, most notably in 2006 when the current version of 177 forced-choice paired items and 34 talent themes were decided upon. Depending on the level of assessment purchased, respondents either receive their Top 5 talent themes or a report containing their entire sequence of 34 talent themes. While each person has all 34 talent themes within their personality, the perspective of educators using

strengths-based development is that it is easier and more beneficial to improve practice in talents at the top of the list than attempting to improve those at the bottom.

Researchers have reviewed the assessment both internally and externally for reliability, validity, and utility with multiple large population samples, but it is intended to be a tool used for self-understanding and should be confirmed and discussed with the respondent for utility (Asplund et al., 2014). Leaders of the Gallup organization recommend individuals who complete the assessment seek feedback and coaching to best understand and capitalize on their results (Gallup, Inc., 2021d)

Additionally, Asplund (2019) analyzed test-retest reliability at intervals from 6 months to 7 or more years between tests. Asplund determined there is a modest positive correlation between tests with a range of .73 to .62, decreasing as length of time between tests increases. Asplund (2019) stated, “The attenuation in correlations over time is modest and generally follows a logarithmic decay profile that slows as time increases” (p. 6). Asplund demonstrated that CliftonStrengths® results are relatively stable over time, indicating reliability in the measure.

In this literature review, I focused on experiences with assessment results, not the assessment itself. Therefore, I explore studies taking place in higher education using the CliftonStrengths® assessment in the classroom, in leadership development, to impact retention, and in overall student experience in the next section. Additionally, I explore studies of researchers seeking to generate theories of strengths-based development.

### **Strengths Integration in the Classroom**

In an early study, Cave (2003) sought to discover if use of strengths-based education in a 1st-year seminar would impact students’ academic motivation. Her study was comprised of 220



1st-year students, and she used an experimental, pretest-posttest, control group design using 12 randomly assigned groups (six control, six experimental). All groups completed the Academic Motivation Scale (Vallerand et al., 1992) as a pre-post assessment, and experimental groups received the CliftonStrengths® assessment and customized workshops focused on strengths-based development (Cave, 2003). At the end of the study, students saw no significant increase in academic motivation as a result of strengths-based interventions when compared to the control group. As a foundational study in higher education, these results were discouraging, but issues existed with the validity of the instrument and execution of the intervention, necessitating more rigorous and organized future methodologies.

A second study on 1st-year seminars had a different result. Stebleton et al. (2012) explored the impact of using the CliftonStrengths® assessment in the 1st-year experience seminar in the College of Education and Human Development at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. The study consisted of 60 students in one section of the course with 6 hours of strengths-based development integrated into the semester-long curriculum. Participants in the study were “primarily female (68%) and Caucasian (72%), and there were approximately 28% students of color; this is higher than the institutional figure of 18% students of color for the entire university” (Stebleton et al., 2012, p. 4). Pre and post Likert-type scale assessments designed by the researchers were taken by participants, and the five measures most connected to self-awareness were used in the analysis (Stebleton et al., 2012).

Results showed a significant increase across all measures ( $p < .05$ ), with effect sizes ranging from medium to high. Integrating strengths-based development into a 1st-year seminar curriculum could have a positive impact on strengths awareness, strengths application, major and career choice, and future expectations (Stebleton et al., 2012). While these results are promising,

there are concerns for generalizability and confirmability of the validity and reliability of the researcher-created instrument and lack of a control group. Stebleton et al. (2012) also suggested future studies include a qualitative element to gather a deep understanding of the impact of strengths interventions.

In a third-class intervention-based study, Louis (2008) used an experimental pretest-posttest control group design to compare the impact of three 1st-year seminar curricula (one based on talent identification, one based on strengths development, and a control group). Both experimental groups received the CliftonStrengths® assessment, but the talent identification intervention group focused on awareness while the development intervention group focused on application. Louis (2008) explored the major variables of “academic engagement, hope, perceived academic control, achievement goal orientation, and mindset” (p. vii).

The sample in this study was made up of 338 1st-year students. The gender of the participants was 58% female and 42% male. The race or ethnicity of participants was 92% White, 0.8% African American, 0.3% American Indian, 1.3% Asian or Pacific Islander, 1.5% Hispanic or Latino, and 1% Multiracial, with 3.1% not responding to the question. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups. Faculty were trained in advance to teach their specific type of class. I will discuss the importance of faculty or staff training in strengths later in this review. Louis (2008) attempted to examine many variables, including individual scale items, which made the results convoluted, but there were two relevant results.

First, participation in either treatment group resulted in a statistically significant increase in a student’s perceived academic control ( $p < .001$ ; Louis, 2008). Second, when comparing mindset posttest scores, there was a statistically significant decrease in the talent identification group ( $t(128) = 8.26, p < .001$ ), while the other two groups remained constant. Louis (2011)

believed this demonstrated a shift in students to a fixed mindset in the talent identification instead of a growth mindset, meaning these students began to believe their skills were fixed and could not be improved. Knowing the mindset scores of the development and control groups remained constant, this result suggests that continued development may be critical, and, in this specific instance, strengths identification without development could be harmful. A significant limitation of this study was that it involved a single site, a small, private, faith-based liberal arts institution. Studies on 1st-year seminars at different types of institutions should be explored in future research.

Focusing on a specific subset of students, Tomasiewicz (2011) examined the impact of a strengths-based focus in a University 101 class for first-semester, undecided students. This study was a mixed-methods sequential design, first using a pre and post assessment to examine perceived impact of strengths-based development and then a follow-up interview with 14 students selected through purposive sampling. An existing University 101 class was examined across the 13 sections because some instructors had incorporated CliftonStrengths® into the syllabi, resulting in nine sections identified as strengths based. Tomasiewicz (2011) stated, “The intervention, at a minimum, required student to complete the online Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, read a strengths-based article or chapters from the StrengthsQuest Online Book, and included a lecture on the strengths-based approach” (p. 53).

First-time freshman in their first semester between the ages of 18-24 made up the quantitative sample in this study. Tomasiewicz (2011) chose to exclude transfer students and students above the age of 24. The final sample of students completing both the pre and post surveys was 88 from the strengths-based sections and 43 from the non-strengths-based sections. Students identified their interest in participating in the qualitative component of the study on

their surveys. Tomaszewicz examined participant responses to determine which students might provide useful results in an interview and invited students to engage in a 45-minute interview. This purposive sampling process resulted in 14 interview participants, eight strengths-based and six non-strengths-based.

Quantitative results indicated that students participating in the strengths-based sections reported considering their weaknesses at a lower rate than students in the non-strengths-based sections ( $p < .01$ ,  $d = .471$ ), with a medium effect size (Tomaszewicz, 2011). This was the only finding with a significant result related to the strength-based sections. While focusing on weakness less because of learning about strengths is a good outcome, the fact that there was no significant difference in the students' intentional focus on strengths challenges the efficacy of this intervention. It is possible that this is due to the short amount of time spent on strengths-based development in the class.

The qualitative component of the study resulted in five major themes: Students in the strengths-based section had positive opinions about the course, students in the non-strengths-based sections stated adding strengths would be useful, strength-based development is an individual journey, students discussed using strengths in personal and academic life, and weakness-fixing is a persistent perspective across participants (Tomaszewicz, 2011). Overall, Tomaszewicz (2011) found undecided students may see value in strengths being integrated into a University 101 course, but the main impact was on frequency of thoughts around weaknesses and not strengths. Adding to this finding that the perspective on weakness-fixing existed across student interviews, educators should continue to help students improve in areas of weakness and consider adding strengths to the overall conversation.

These studies demonstrate that integrating the CliftonStrengths® assessment and strengths-based development into 1st-year classes could be promising, but significantly more research across more content areas is needed to increase validity. Additionally, Cave (2003) showed the need for careful design and implementation of a strengths-based intervention. This statement would be accurate for any intervention, but there is a concern that the implementation of strengths in a haphazard way could result in more harm than good (Louis, 2011). Overall, these studies suggest general populations of students may find value in participating in strengths-based development and deeper knowledge of strengths may help students in their collegiate pursuits and future plans. Questions remain as to the depth of the experience that ongoing strengths-based development activities create and if they can benefit target student populations.

### **Strengths in Leadership Development**

There is one study in which the researcher explored, in part, strengths ownership as a predictor of results on an assessment of leadership capacity. Wisner (2008) sought to determine if students' scores on the psychological capital inventories and a strengths ownership scale (adapted from components of a scale created by the Gallup organization) would predict results on the Student Leadership Practices Inventory, an assessment designed to evaluate the five components of the leadership challenge model. Wisner sampled 153 student leaders across five faith-based institutions. All participants held leadership positions on their campuses at the time of the study and had completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment.

Wisner (2008) analyzed the data using a hierarchical multiple regression model. Student demographics were entered as the first block of variables. The four components of psychological capital (self-efficacy, optimism, hope, and resilience) were entered as the second block of variables. Strengths ownership was entered as the third block of variables, and Wisner

hypothesized that it would add significant variance beyond that of psychological capital alone. Though, results did show some significance of individual components of psychological capital, strengths ownership was not significant as a predictor of Student Leadership Practices Inventory scores (Wisner, 2008). Lack of significance of strengths ownership in this model could be for various reasons. One obvious reason may be strengths is not a predictor beyond psychological capital. Alternatively, Wisner stated there was low variability in the sample and generally positive answers on the strengths ownership measure, which could be from social desirability bias and lead to a non-significant result. Additional research with strengths ownership studied independently could explore this result further.

### **Strengths as a Retention Tool**

Many researchers explore the relationship between use of the CliftonStrengths® assessment and retention on college campuses. Williamson (2002) explored academic performance and persistence of first-time students. Williamson hoped to determine if students who took the CliftonStrengths assessment and received training and consultation earned higher GPAs, completed more credit hours, and maintained higher retention rates. The experimental study was made up of a study ( $n = 32$ ) and control ( $n = 40$ ) group drawn from students in 1st-year English classes, though the intervention was not connected to course content. The sample was balanced with respect to gender, but no other demographics (for the study nor population) were reported, making generalizability difficult (Williamson, 2002).

Results showed students who participated in the study group received a higher GPA in the first semester and earned more credit hours than those in the control group, both at a  $p < .05$ . Additionally, Williamson (2002) found “the study group participants returned from the Fall 2001 semester to the Spring 2002 semester at a 97% rate and the control group students returned at an

87% rate” (p. 2). A significant limitation of this study is that it was a small sample from a small private school with a religious affiliation, which adds to the limited generalizability. Additional questions remain about the difference in impact of just taking the assessment versus participating in structured strengths-based development.

Two additional retention studies were completed by the same researchers, at the same institution, in the same year. Soria and Stubblefield (2015a) explored the relationship between participation in strengths-based development and retention into the second year across the entire cohort of 1st-year students at a large, Midwestern, public research-intensive university. All incoming students took the CliftonStrengths® assessment ( $n = 5,368$ ) and were invited to take a two-part survey. First was the Strengths Awareness Measure, an assessment shown to be reliable at a Cronbach alpha of .86 (Schreiner, 2004, as cited in Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a). Second, students were invited to share where and with whom they discussed their themes, which provided some of the most promising data from the study. Soria and Stubblefield (2015a) reported 27.8% of 1st-year students ( $n = 1,493$ ) completed the follow-up survey. Of the participants, 26% reported as first-generation college students.

Results showed 91.5% of students who took the CliftonStrengths® assessment were retained to the second year while only 80.8% of students who did not take the assessment were retained, a significant result ( $p < .001$ ). Additionally, the survey demonstrated strengths awareness and discussions about strengths in classes ( $p < .05$ ); with advisors or career counselors ( $p < .01$ ); and in study groups, student organizations, or with friends ( $p < .001$ ) significantly related to retention. In fact, discussions with advisors, career counselors, friends, study groups, and student organizations had the strongest relationship even beyond GPA (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015a).

The results of this study are valuable as they are based on a large sample with data across an entire campus. Additionally, this is one of the first quantitative studies to explore the impact of the developmental aspect of strengths in such a sizeable comparative sample. These results demonstrate a need to explore the relationship of outside-the-classroom engagement with strengths as most studies discussed so far are classroom interventions. It appears participants' discussions of strengths-based development paired with various support networks may be important contributors to retention, and this is an area of research that could be studied more beyond that one measure.

The second study from Soria and Stubblefield (2015b) is important because they explored students' sense of belonging alongside retention. It was a mixed-methods study and provided some of the first qualitative data about strengths-based development. The researchers used the same data as the previous study. Quantitative results from this study suggested strengths awareness and discussing strengths were positively related to a sense of belonging ( $p < .001$ ), and students who discussed strengths were significantly more likely to feel a sense of belonging than those who did not (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015b). These data suggest students' results from the CliftonStrengths® assessment are not only helpful as a developmental tool, but also as a tool to be used for connection with other students.

Soria and Stubblefield (2015b) collected qualitative data from the survey through open-ended questions and then coded the data themes using open coding, in vivo coding, axial coding, and selective coding. Results of the coding provided four major thematic areas: "strengths enhanced their self-awareness and confidence, facilitated introductory conversations with their peers through a development of a common language, fostered friendships and a deeper



understanding of others, and contributed to their sense of belonging” (Soria & Stubblefield, 2015b, p. 362).

With the results of this study, Soria and Stubblefield pushed researchers to incorporate a more holistic view of the CliftonStrengths® assessment and strengths-based development in college. Exploration of quantitative results is important, but, as a student participates in a strengths-based development program, researchers in this section suggest much more is happening to benefit the student in their development and their ability to succeed in college. Perhaps there is an impact on well-being, hope, sense of belonging, or greater self-understanding and acceptance; new qualitative data and theory development are needed to learn more.

### **Acquiring Thick Data and Developing Theory**

Quantitative research is critical in developing basic correlational data and predictive models, but almost all studies involving the CliftonStrengths® assessment were conducted at single institutions with mostly homogenous samples of students. More quantitative research is needed to expand the knowledge of intervention impact at different types of universities and with a broader demographic of students. In addition, researchers can use qualitative data to understand the phenomenon of strengths-based development and how to use it effectively.

In a phenomenological study involving elite female softball players in the United States, Robles (2009) examined the phenomenon of strengths-based development in competitive sports. One expert reader (a two-time USA Olympic goal medalist) and 16 participants were interviewed to understand if and how these elite athletes view their strengths as identified by the CliftonStrengths® assessment and how they felt they used these strengths in their athletic pursuits. The 16 participants ranged in age from 18 to 46 years old. After completing the assessment and analyzing their data, participants completed two interviews and activities. The

activities were a ranking activity of their CliftonStrengths results in the first interview and a CliftonStrengths signature themes worksheet in the second (Robles, 2009). The expert reader participated in two interviews, the first was a reflection on her own results and the second was to provide feedback on the key findings of the study.

The analysis of the interview transcripts and individual results yielded six overarching themes: (a) Athletes used executing and/or relational talent themes to succeed, (b) they identified a base or central strength, (c) they naturally capitalize on their strengths, (d) they used strengths to overcome obstacles, (e) they embrace optimism and positivity, and (f) they see a positive impact from a strengths philosophy (Robles, 2009). These results show the possibility of a strengths philosophy impacting a specific population of student, and researchers could look at other student populations to study the phenomenon of strengths development.

One limitation in this study is that participants had not been exposed to CliftonStrengths® during their collegiate experience; rather, they were given access to the assessment for the study. Participants were reflecting backwards on their time as an elite athlete and applying the results to their past experiences. Researchers could conduct additional studies into this population to study the phenomenon of strengths-based development in action on the softball field with students who were given access to their CliftonStrengths results during their time as college athletes.

In his study of 12 student mentors at a university in the United Kingdom, Pritchard (2008) attempted to create a grounded theory of strengths in college students. He conducted his study over 4 months. Data were a result of interviews and blog posts written by students who participated in a 2-day CliftonStrengths® training, which consisted of five 2-hour workshops conducted by a trained instructor from the United States. The first set of interviews took place

immediately following the intervention, and the second set took place 4 months later, after summer recess. Pritchard sent three blog prompts to students, once every 3 weeks, leaving the last few months without a prompt.

Pritchard (2008) coded the interviews using open coding, axial, and selective coding and identified six questions, later defined as themes in “the student strengths journey” (p. 55). The themes were positive and negative initial mediators of the intervention, short-term psychosocial effects of the intervention, positive and negative 4-month mediators of the intervention, and psychosocial effects of the intervention 4 months later (Pritchard, 2008). Reflecting on these themes and relating codes, it appears the researcher provided a grounded theory in relation to the specific intervention, rather than an overall theory of strengths development.

Regardless of this fact, the researcher provided some helpful insights to understand the phenomenon of strengths development. Overall, it appears an intervention involving the CliftonStrengths® assessment is essential to kickstart a student’s strengths journey, but the effect trails off if the student stops engaging with strengths on a regular basis. Pritchard (2008) recognized that, while some students positively described their experience and its impact on their lives, many of those same students could not list their Top 5 talents 4 months later. The need for ongoing engagement with strengths activities aligns with the results of Soria and Stubblefield (2015a, 2015b), who demonstrated the positive relationship of retention and belonging with discussing strengths with peers, club members, and others.

Three other points deserve mention from this study. First, Pritchard (2008) related his results to major theories of positive psychology, which indicates the need for more research connecting strengths-based development to theories such as hope, broaden and build, self-efficacy, and optimism. Second, he recognized the experienced facilitator had a major impact on

the success of the intervention and its effect, setting the stage for the argument that campuses with these programs need trained coaches. Finally, this study included 11 White students and one Asian student who identified as part of the Muslim faith. He identified her as an outlier and recognized that her faith could have been a confounding variable but did not discuss the potential impact religion and spirituality might have on positive psychology interventions in different cultures (Lopez et al., 2005). Exploration into that outlier would have been an enlightening negative-case analysis in this study.

An additional grounded theory study on strengths-based development was based on interviews of eight students who were nominated as those invested in strengths development (Bowers & Lopez, 2010; Janowski, 2006). This study was the only multi-institutional qualitative study in the literature and provides context for future research. Janowski conducted interviews with each participant. After the interviews, Janowski (2006) and a second graduate student transcribed and coded data using text-driven coding, sensitizing, and selective coding. The author shared quotations from participants to demonstrate each aspect of the grounded theory in addition to summary tables showing the frequency in which participants discussed each theory component.

The researchers did not focus on a specific intervention; instead, the external factors that lead to capitalization on strengths and the conclusion that continual social support, successful collegiate experiences, and reinforcement of personal strengths provided the confidence to use strengths in college (Bowers & Lopez, 2010). Similar to Pritchard (2008), the researchers attempted to align these concepts with various positive psychology theories. Janowski (2006) stated that the experiences of success construct could be explained through hope theory as it relates to both short- and long-term goals. Though mentioned, this connection is cursory at best

and necessitates additional exploration. Specific research is needed to examine strengths-based development in relation to positive psychology theories to better understand why and how these interventions might work.

Bowers and Lopez (2010) attempted to demonstrate a method for strengths development and to show how social support and opportunities for strengths success can create a cycle that helps students continually improve upon their strengths. The social support component of this theory aligns with the relationship between retention and strengths discussions with advisors and peers in Soria and Stubblefield's study (2015a). More research is needed to expand on this theory and add internal factors discussed by Pritchard (2008) to generate a complete picture. However, it needs mentioned again, this study, though multi-institutional, is ethnically homogenous with seven of eight participants identifying as White. More research is needed to expand these theories to different student populations.

Mostek (2010) indirectly enhanced the idea of capitalization in a qualitative study about strengths-based development with five undergraduate business students and three of their academic advisors. The restriction to business majors at one school makes this study very specific, but the descriptive information and themes are helpful for future studies. The study was interview-based and designed to better understand the phenomenon of strengths-based development in these specific students. Mostek (2010) stated "over 600 codes were uncovered while coding the transcripts" (p. 42), which she then reduced into six major themes. Mostek asserted strengths-based development helped students define themselves, learn to work with others, decide to use strengths, make choices, and focus on their future. Mostek also noted students with greater exposure and training with strengths-based development seemed to

understand themselves more deeply, which may add to the idea of capitalizing on strengths (Bowers & Lopez, 2010).

One critical comment from Mostek (2010) that needs more qualitative exploration was that only learning about one's themes without support could turn into a detriment. If verified through additional studies, this finding could have major implications for campuses that use the CliftonStrengths® assessment without a developmental program in place. This idea is consistent with previously mentioned results (Louis, 2011; Seligman et al., 2005) whose researchers also suggested strengths-based developmental activities are critical to the positive impact of a strengths-focused program.

After reviewing studies involving strengths, two future areas of research are clear. First, research is needed to assist in understanding what types of interventions are more beneficial than others and why specific experiences are transformational for students. Second, specific subsets of students should be studied. I discuss this topic in the next section.

### **First-Generation College Students**

In this review, I identified that future quantitative and qualitative researchers of the CliftonStrengths® assessment should explore the impact of strengths-based development in specific populations of students. One population that could be explored using the theories and strategies discussed thus far is first-generation college students. First-generation college students are a sizable and critical population at colleges and universities with unique barriers to success, which necessitate support programs on campuses. First-generation college students have been defined in different ways, and the chosen definition dictates the size of the population identified on college campuses. In this study, the working definition of first-generation college students is those whose parents did not attend college. In the next section, I describe relevant research

relating to first-generation college students and show that an added focus on assets and strengths may support this population.

A reason why studying the experiences of first-generation college students with strengths-based development is critically important is first-generation college students appear to have persistence and retention rates lower than their non-first-generation peers. In a study using longitudinal, national data sets gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics, Ishitani (2006) explored year-by-year rates of departure for first-generation college students as compared to non-first-generation students. The sample consisted of 4,427 students who were in eighth grade in 1988 and enrolled in a 4-year institution between 1991 and 1994.

Study results showed parental education had a significant effect on retention, with first-generation students more likely to leave the institution in Years 1-4. Most striking was that in the second year, first-generation college students were 8.5 times more likely to depart their campus (Ishitani, 2006). Additionally, when looking at time to degree, Ishitani (2006) discovered first-generation college students were “51% and 32% less likely to graduate in the fourth and fifth years than were students whose parents graduated from college” (p. 887). This author indicates university administrators should explore different ways to assist first-generation college students in persisting through college to obtain their degree.

A conventional narrative is that first-generation students have less preparation, less motivation, and less social capital, as defined by Bourdieu’s (1986) cultural capital theory and, therefore, are less successful in their pursuit of higher education. Yosso (2005) posited an alternative theory that students bring many forms of capital to campus and help to leverage this capital can assist in student success. Using this theory, Yosso (2005) outlined five forms of capital that could be added to conventional social capital as described by Bourdieu: aspirational,

familial, linguistic, resistant, and navigational. These assets could be strengths that students bring to their college experience when added to traditional social connections.

Juarez (2020) explored Yosso's (2005) community culture wealth theory with first-generation college students. Juarez (2020) interviewed eight Latinx students at one university who had completed a pre-college achievement program. Juarez analyzed the students' experiences through the six components of Yosso's theory and demonstrated how first-generation college students leveraged each form of cultural capital to succeed in college. Researchers could continue to explore this model and expand on the assets first-generation college students bring to their collegiate experiences. Examples of first-generation college students' additional assets may include strengths as described in the CliftonStrengths® assessment.

In one small, qualitative study of three first-generation college students at an open-access 4-year institution, Garrison and Douglas (2012) used interviews to attempt to create a grounded theory relating to assets brought to campus by first-generation college students. The sample was homogenous in terms of race and therefore not a representative sample of the diverse population of first-generation college students. Garrison and Douglas suggested four asset themes of these students. Framed in the positive psychology theory of psychological capital, these asset themes were proactive, goal-directed, optimistic, and reflexive (Garrison & Douglas, 2012). Researchers could attempt to replicate these results in more diverse studies to determine a broader application of Garrison's four asset themes in the success of first-generation college students.

Finally, Pascarella et al. (2004) studied first-generation college students using the second- and third-year results from the National Study of Student Learning, which included data from 18 4-year colleges from Fall 1992 to Spring 1995. Sampled institutions ranged in type, size,



residential makeup, and demographic makeup and resulted in a sampling of students similar to the national population. Overall, 1,613 participants were in their second year and 1,054 in their third year. Compared to students with high parental postsecondary education (both parents completing bachelor's degrees or higher), first-generation college students completed fewer credits ( $p < .01$ ) and worked more hours ( $p < .01$ ). Additionally, they were less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities ( $p < .01$ ) in the second year and interacted less with peers in the third year ( $p < .05$ ; Pascarella et al., 2004).

While these results were in line with other research, one interesting result was that though first-generation college students were less likely to be involved in extracurricular activities and interact less with peers, those involvements had a more substantial effect on some college outcomes than their non-first-generation counterparts (Pascarella et al., 2004). These results may suggest that the types of extracurricular activities and social engagements that best support first-generation college student success need explored. If first-generation college students have less time to engage in activities, practitioners should make sure those activities in which they choose to participate contribute more to student success. The phenomenon of student experiences with strengths-based development supports the argument that university administrators should focus on first-generation college students' assets in addition to their deficits.

### **Conclusion**

In this review, I explored the concept of positive psychology, demonstrating the potential positive impact of a focus on assets of human potential. I also examined studies using the CliftonStrengths® assessment and strengths-based development to better understand the potential impact on students. Additionally, I discussed the unique population of first-generation

college students to demonstrate a need for different methods of support, specifically those focused on assets and strengths.

I identified gaps in the literature relating to asset development in college students, specifically on strengths-based interventions. Most researchers of the quantitative studies discussed in this review explored retention at one intervention or one campus, and the qualitative researchers attempted to generate theories to explain the “why” of strengths development. Few researchers attempted to explore the phenomenon of strengths-based development through the experiences of specific populations of students.

It is critical that future researchers examine the effects of strengths-based development, beyond the assessment itself, on populations such as first-generation college students who might benefit significantly from these programmatic efforts. First-generation college students are a large population across all public college campuses, and practitioners could use the results to plan for new ways to use the CliftonStrengths® assessment in their work. It is also important to look deeply at the phenomenon of strengths-based development and generate rich descriptions through qualitative inquiry. Finally, future researchers should expand beyond a single intervention and single campus to better understand this phenomenon.

In this review, I demonstrated a need for the current study; a multi-institutional, qualitative, phenomenological study in which I focused on experiences of first-generation college students with strengths-based development to answer the central research question: “What are the experiences of first-generation college students at 4-year public colleges with strengths-based development?” In this study, I hope to fill a gap in the research involving strengths-based development with specific students and provide a basis for future research at other campuses and with other student populations.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

In this research study, I explored the experiences of first-generation college students with strengths-based development at 4-year public universities. This qualitative research was grounded in the constructivist worldview. I used the phenomenological approach to better understand the phenomenon of strengths-based development in the context of first-generation college students. In this chapter, I describe my worldview, or the worldview of the researcher, study design, data analysis procedures, and issues of trustworthiness. I also describe aspects of my initial study design that I modified due to difficulties of conducting this research during a global pandemic with students experiencing virtual education.

### **Constructivism**

From a holistic perspective, I aligned this research to the constructivist paradigm (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). Constructivist research is based on the premise that individuals construct meaning through their interaction with and interpretation of objects in the world around them (Crotty, 1998). Constructions can be individually held or based on shared sense-making efforts but are not foundational or permanent; they are constructed as a way to engage and explain the world (Lincoln & Guba, 2013). I view my research through this conceptual lens and use this lens to construct my own understanding of reality.

As they engage in and create their own reality, people learn from their experiences and actively work to improve their environment. Practitioners of positive psychology believe people can learn optimism, hope, and other ideas to engage positively in their created world (Lopez & Snyder, 2009). Therefore, the tenets of positive psychology can be aligned with those of constructivist research (Mahoney, 2005). In fact, for constructivism and positive psychology, “a

large part of their promise may therefore stem from their openness to a more holistic conceptualization of what it means to be human and to be partially and developmentally conscious” (Mahoney, 2005, p. 750). This holistic conceptualization of humanity is key to the integration of strengths into the student experience. I use it to reinforce the need to explore this research through the constructivist paradigm.

### **Qualitative Methodology**

My goal for this study was to gather an in-depth description of the experience of students engaging in strengths-based development. Due to this overarching goal, qualitative research methods were the most effective research methods (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative research, the researcher explores multiple constructions of reality offered by participants and attempts to create themes supported by the data offered. The researcher attempts to get close to the data to understand the topic studied and offers direct evidence from participants to illuminate the depth of the data. Additionally, the qualitative researcher is not absent from the analysis. The researcher discusses their bias and weaves opinion and interpretation into the research (Creswell, 2013). By conducting this research using qualitative research methods, I will provide a good description of strengths-based development.

### **Phenomenology**

In qualitative research, the style of phenomenology was best suited for this study. According to Creswell (2013), phenomenological researchers explore a specific concept or phenomenon through the experiences of individuals. Researchers are less concerned about the specific person studied, but rather how they construct their understanding and experience with the phenomenon. By collecting data from multiple sources with direct experience, the researcher can develop “a description of the experiences about the phenomenon that all individuals have in

common—the essence of the experience” (Creswell, 2013, p. 122). With this understanding, I believe this style of research is best for gathering a deep understanding of strengths-based development and a description of the experience through the lens of first-generation college students.

### **Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis**

There are multiple ways to conduct phenomenological research. I used the method of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Researchers using IPA are informed by hermeneutics and the theory of interpretation, and they conduct research that is idiographic, or focused on individual sensemaking (Smith et al., 2009). According to Smith et al. (2009), “when people are engaged with ‘an experience’ of something major in their lives, they begin to reflect on the significance of what is happening, and IPA research aims to engage with these reflections” (p. 3). This description of IPA research clearly outlines my goals for this research study—to engage and interpret reflections of individual first-generation college students on their experiences with strengths-based development.

### **Purpose**

My purpose for this study was to examine experiences of first-generation college students at 4-year public universities with strengths-based development. I will use the study results to provide descriptive information to inform future researchers and higher education practitioners who work with this population of student and the CliftonStrengths® assessment.

### **Research Questions**

The central guiding research question of this study was “What are the experiences of first-generation college students at 4-year public colleges with strengths-based development?”

The following sub-questions were also explored:

1. What are the perceptions of first-generation college students of their results from the CliftonStrengths® assessment?
2. How do first-generation college students use their CliftonStrengths® assessment results in their collegiate experience?
3. What perceptions do first-generation college students have of the impact of strengths-based one-on-one coaching on their collegiate experience?
4. How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of various intervention activities (e.g., classroom-based experiences, 1st-year seminars, workshops, and group activities) using CliftonStrengths® results on their collegiate experience?
5. How do first-generation college students use informal social interactions to aid in their strengths-based development?
6. How do first-generation college students perceive participation in strengths-based development helping them accomplish goals or succeeding in college?

### **Pilot Study**

Prior to selection of study sites, I conducted a pilot study to evaluate the efficacy of my interview questions. Through this pilot study, I determined if I could use my interview protocol to elicit answers to aid in answering the research questions and conduct an interview with the length and depth necessary to glean a rich description of the phenomenon. I recruited two pilot study participants via social media. One was a recent graduate of a university on the West coast, and the second was from a Midwestern university. Both had completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment and participated in many campus-based strengths-based development programs, including coaching.

Immediately after completing the interviews, I asked for feedback from participants and then analyzed the interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 75 minutes. I modified, removed, and added interview questions based on what I learned from content and participant feedback. This pilot interview process ensured a greater possibility of high-quality research interviews through a honed interview protocol and researcher experience. Results from the pilot study are not included in this document.

### **Site and Sample**

This study was a multi-institutional design focused on first-generation college students at 4-year public universities. As outlined in the literature, most research conducted on strengths-based development has occurred at small, private universities. Data on first-generation college students at 4-year public universities could add a new layer to existing research.

### **Research Sites and Context**

I selected three universities for participation in the study based on the following criteria: (a) students must be provided access to complete the CliftonStrengths® assessment on their campus and (b) students must be able to participate in at least one strengths-based intervention so they can develop understanding and begin to use their CliftonStrengths results. The interventions range from individual coaching to group development to formal classroom learning. I sought out sites that include a variety of interventions for robustness in the data. Additionally, I gave preference to universities where students had access to one-on-one coaching and/or had a Certified CliftonStrengths coach on campus, but these additional criteria are rare and to require them may have eliminated all potential research sites.

Using these criteria, I developed a pool of nine potential study sites using an online search and exploration of CliftonStrengths offerings through campus websites. All nine potential

sites were contacted, and three confirmed interest in participating in the study. All three study sites offered robust strengths-based development programs and host a variety of differing programs, including coaching, peer mentoring, workshops, and classroom engagements.

Study Site 1 is in the Midwest. Of the over 20,000 undergraduate students, over 25% are first-generation college students, and approximately 15% identified as a person of color. The Carnegie Classification of Site 1 is as a very high research doctoral university. Study Site 2 is also located in the Midwest with over 30,000 undergraduate students. Of these students, 20% are first-generation college students, and approximately 40% identified as a person of color. The Carnegie Classification of Site 2 is as a research high doctoral university. Study Site 3 is located in the Southeast and enrolls approximately 4,000 undergraduates with 25% first-generation college students, and approximately 23% identified as a person of color. The Carnegie Classification of Site 3 is as a larger program master's level university.

## **Participants**

I employed a purposeful sampling approach, which is an important component of IPA. In purposeful sampling, participants are selected because they have a depth of knowledge and experiences and can shed light on the phenomenon and research questions (Creswell, 2013). Using specific criteria to identify participants ensured enough data could be gathered to clearly explain the phenomenon in question. I used the following criteria to select participants:

- Students were first-generation college students;
- Students were of junior or senior status, which allowed for a depth of experience with the phenomenon and a large number of college experiences from which to draw;
- Students were between the ages of 19 and 23 years old; and



- Students had completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment and participated in at least one intervention activity.

Including students beyond the 19-23 age group would have introduced additional confounding life experiences, which would make generating themes difficult. Additional demographic information was not controlled but are reported in my findings (see Appendix B). It is entirely possible that other aspects of the participants' identities are equally or more salient as compared to their status as a first-generation college student, which could inform future research on use of the CliftonStrengths® assessment with other populations of students.

My goal was to recruit four participants from each research site to understand both the unique experiences of the students and common experiences at the individual site. Unfortunately, due to the difficulties experienced in recruiting students during a global pandemic, I was only able to interview seven participants: three from Site 1, three from Site 2, and one from Site 3. Though this did not allow me to analyze individual study sites, seven interviews are within a recommended range for IPA research (Smith et al., 2009). From these individual interviews and the focus group, I gathered enough data to provide a rich description of the phenomenon of strengths-based development across the three study sites.

### **Data Collection Procedure**

I designed my data collection procedure to ensure that study participants would have a depth of knowledge about strengths-based development. I did this by first contacting gatekeepers who would personally know students who had participated in strengths-based programs on their campus. After being introduced to potential participants, I engaged them in individual interviews and a focus group. I gathered a large amount of data, which I then analyzed. All data collection procedures for study sites and study participants were conducted after receiving IRB approval.

## **Contacting Gatekeepers**

At each study site, I identified and contacted gatekeepers to support the study (see Appendix C). These gatekeepers were the individuals responsible for either administering the CliftonStrengths® assessment or coordinating parts of the strengths-based development program on their campus. Since use of the assessment is often tied to a specific office on campus, I identified these individuals through the university's website or through my professional network. I contacted gatekeepers to receive permission to interview students and support me in the recruitment of students on their campus. Use of local and familiar campus staff to contact students allowed for a greater response rate to my invitation. Through the recruitment process, each gatekeeper contacted students multiple times to draw the needed number of interviews. Once they received interest, the gatekeepers introduced me to potential participants.

## **Contacting Participants**

I shared an invitation letter with the potential participants after being introduced to them by the campus gatekeeper. In the invitation letter, I identified the purpose of the research study and clearly outlined criteria a student must meet to participate in the study (see Appendix D). Students then confirmed their interest and eligibility to participate in the study. Finally, students completed an informed consent form to participate in the study (see Appendix E).

## **Individual Interviews**

Participants engaged in one semi-structured virtual interview. Interviews took place between April 2020 and November 2020. Interviews averaged 80 minutes in length. I conducted six of the interviews prior to the focus group and one after the focus group. In IPA, semi-structured interviews are a common method of data collection (see Appendix F). This type of interview allows the researcher to quickly build rapport and have a guiding list of research

questions but adjust and ask follow-up questions based on the participants' answers (Smith et al., 2009). By using this interview style, I was able to facilitate conversations in which the students thoroughly illustrated their experiences with the phenomenon of strengths-based development. One unique aspect of this interview process was that all interviews were conducted via video conference. This format could have resulted in a decreased sense of rapport and openness, but I am experienced and skilled in video interviews, which mitigated most issues. It was fortuitous that I conducted this research virtually, as interviews took place amidst a global health pandemic; therefore, the study sites had transitioned to a virtual environment.

### **Focus Group**

After data collection and analysis of six interviews, I invited participants to engage in a 90-minute follow-up virtual focus group in November 2020. Four of the six participants attended the focus group. Though focus groups are not commonly used in IPA research, I determined that bringing participants from multiple universities together to discuss common themes could add additional information about the shared phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009). In this focus group, I presented initial themes and concepts to participants to receive feedback and additional narrative about their experiences (see Appendix G). Not only did this allow for a second round of data analysis, the focus group also served as a form of member checking, which increased the trustworthiness of the study (Glesne, 2016).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Colorado State University and remained approved throughout the period of active data collection and data analysis. Focus group questions were submitted and approved by the IRB upon their creation after the initial data analysis process. Additionally, I conducted the research with the support of a

faculty member at the university. Once I recruited participants, they completed an informed consent form, which included an explanation of the study and methods of data protection. I also reviewed the informed consent before individual interviews and the focus group. Participant information was not particularly sensitive; nonetheless, data and identities must be protected. Each participant chose a pseudonym, and I do not identify the research sites. Pseudonyms are only one form of data protection; therefore, the informed consent form also contained information on who will have access to the data and how data will be used (Oliver, 2010).

I audio-recorded the interviews and the focus group so transcription could take place. I labeled audio recordings and transcriptions with participant pseudonyms and kept these on a password-protected laptop in a secure location in my possession. The audio recordings will be deleted upon the completion of the dissertation, and transcripts will be maintained indefinitely under the participant's pseudonym.

### **Timeline**

I collected data for this research over the course of eight months. Initial data analysis and coding began immediately after I completed the first interview and continued until I identified initial themes. The first six interviews took place between April 2020 and June 2020. Due to the graduation of three participants and a desire to maintain interest and ensure engagement, I held the focus group in early November 2020. After the focus group, a gatekeeper identified one additional participant. I interviewed the seventh participant at the end of November 2020 to add additional depth to the study.

### **Data Analysis**

The analysis process followed the steps of IPA as outlined by Smith et al. (2009). The first step involved multiple readings of each transcript to put the participant in the forefront and

begin to develop an overall understanding of each individual narrative. The second step was initial noting, which is an in-depth analysis where the researcher reads the transcript closely and notes anything of interest in the margins (Smith et al., 2009). This ensured I missed nothing of importance in the review process.

After the initial noting step of each interview transcript, I used Dedoose Version 8.3.45, a computer analysis software, to code and analyze data and maintain a significant number of excerpts and notes. For coding, I used a line-by-line process involving descriptive, in vivo, and emotion coding to begin to identify themes. Miles et al. (2014) defined *descriptive coding* as a technique researchers use to summarize passages of data. They describe *in vivo coding* as a technique researchers use to draw out specific verbatim phrases in the participant's transcript. They describe *emotion coding* as a technique researchers use to identify emotions specifically mentioned by the participant or deduced by the researcher themselves.

I used these coding processes to highlight the voice of participants in the final display of results, ensuring authenticity of the data. Through this process, I identified 379 individual codes, which I used to generate initial themes. The seventh interview added 17 unique codes to my data set, increasing the final count to 396. These additional codes fit under the initial themes and provided more context to my discussion.

Third, I developed initial themes, which “simultaneously attempts to reduce the volume of detail (the transcript and the initial notes) whilst maintaining complexity in terms of mapping the interrelationships, connections and patterns between exploratory notes” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 91). Fourth, I explored connections between themes. I continued this process within each case. The final step involved examining connections across all collected interviews. This provided a

deep and rich narrative to explain the experiences of these students with the phenomenon of strengths-based development.

Once I completed this process, I presented and discussed the eight initial theme patterns with four participants in the focus group setting. I received feedback directly from participants on the accuracy of the analysis during the focus group. Participants confirmed the accuracy of my analysis and helped to combine themes or provide clearer language used in describing the themes. Participants also provided additional narrative examples related or counter to the presented themes. Once the focus group was completed, I analyzed the new data using IPA. I adjusted final themes to provide a more accurate and complete description of the phenomenon. Using this additional step, I uncovered powerful information that would have been missed if I only used individual interviews. Through this process, I created a final list of five superordinate themes, each with two subordinate themes.

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, issues of trustworthiness must be addressed to ensure the researcher maintains high standards and presents usable data. Major areas of trustworthiness to be addressed are credibility, transferability, confirmability, and dependability (Schwandt, 2015). I address each in this section.

#### **Credibility**

Credibility is the importance of demonstrating that the data presented are consistent with the narrative provided by participants (Schwandt, 2015). I employed the techniques of member checking and negative case analysis to maintain credibility. To ensure participants provided feedback on their interview, I provided transcripts between the initial interview and virtual focus group. This ensured I used the most correct version of the transcript in data analysis. No

participant submitted edits to their transcript, though many commented on the content, confirming they had read the full transcript. Member checking of emergent themes took place during the virtual focus group, where participants commented on themes and determined if their voices were represented in the data. Use of negative case analysis means the researcher will present participant data that run counter to the overall themes if they exist. This technique allows readers to gather a holistic view of the phenomenon, including inconsistencies.

### **Transferability**

To maintain transferability, the researcher must provide enough information about participants and sites so others can determine how close the population relates to their own situation (Schwandt, 2015). I met these criteria by providing demographic data of the research sites and participants and descriptions of the experiences that shaped the development in each participant. Additionally, the purposeful sampling process ensured participants had a deep understanding of the phenomenon and allowed for transferability. Though this research is not generalizable, practitioners will be able to use the data to make informed decisions in how they use the CliftonStrengths® assessment with first-generation college students in the future.

### **Confirmability**

Confirmability is the need for a clear description of the bias of the researcher and an audit trail. I discussed my researcher perspective and bias at length and continued to incorporate both into the final analysis and discussion. Future researchers will be able to use my audit trail, or the detailed tracking and describing of the research, to embark on similar studies with this population or others (Miles et al., 2014). By accounting for bias and providing detailed information about the research process, I met the criteria of confirmability.

## **Dependability**

To establish dependability, or an understanding that the research process was well thought out and documented, the local Institutional Review Board approved this research. Four skilled researchers in the field served as my dissertation committee and also evaluated this research. The appendices include the IRB approval letter and all documents used, including participant invitations, consent form, and interview protocols, to establish this criterion of trustworthiness.

## **Conclusion**

In this chapter, I outlined my approach, worldview, and style. I conducted this research through a constructivist lens using a phenomenological approach. The style of research was appropriate to understand experiences of first-generation college students with strengths-based development. Specifically, I used IPA as the method of data collection and analysis. I discussed participant and site selection criteria and outlined the step-by-step research process. Finally, I discussed various methods used to address the four major criteria of trustworthiness. The detailed process of research described in this chapter ensured I uncovered an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon of strengths-based development in first-generation college students.



## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

I conducted a qualitative phenomenological study to examine experiences of first-generation college students with strengths-based development at 4-year public universities. I explored how seven first-generation college students received feedback on their CliftonStrengths® results, participated in CliftonStrengths programs and activities, and leveraged their strengths throughout their collegiate experiences. The central guiding research question of this study was “What are the experiences of first-generation college students at 4-year public colleges with strengths-based development?”

I also explored the following sub-questions:

1. What are the perceptions of first-generation college students of their results from the CliftonStrengths® assessment?
2. How do first-generation college students use their CliftonStrengths® assessment results in their collegiate experience?
3. What perceptions do first-generation college students have of the impact of strengths-based one-on-one coaching on their collegiate experience?
4. How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of various intervention activities (e.g., classroom-based experiences, 1st-year seminars, workshops, and group activities) using CliftonStrengths® results on their collegiate experience?
5. How do first-generation college students use informal social interactions to aid in their strengths-based development?
6. How do first-generation college students perceive participation in strengths-based development in helping them accomplish goals or succeed in college?

## **Description of Participants**

Participants in this study attended one of three colleges and had a wide range of experiences with CliftonStrengths®, both in depth of knowledge and participation in programs. Each participant was unique in their lived experience as a first-generation college student. To understand each individual prior to discussion of larger themes across the sample, I introduce each student in this chapter, including a breakdown of participant characteristics and Top 5 talent themes in Tables 1 and 2. Though a small sample of seven participants, the characteristic breakdown in Table 1 shows a sample that is close to the demographics of the general population of first-generation college students (Saenz et al., 2007; Skomsvold, 2014). Participants were provided an opportunity to use pseudonyms in this research, and those chosen pseudonyms are used in these descriptions.

### **Alondra**

Alondra was a junior majoring in child, youth, and family studies with a Top 5 talent sequence of Harmony®, Restorative™, Individualization®, Context®, and Connectedness®. She was an in-state student and received a scholarship. Her scholarship program was an active program on campus where she learned about and developed her CliftonStrengths®. Alondra was connected to her university and had visited in summers throughout high school. When asked about her first-generation status, Alondra said:

I am the first one out of my whole extended family to go to a university even back when we were in Mexico and we immigrated here, I am the first one. It's really special, it's a lot of pressure a lot of times but I really like that because I feel like I'm working hard towards something and making my family proud.

Alondra was involved at her university. She started student organizations, became a leader in her sorority, and a prominent leader in the fraternity and sorority community.

Alondra completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment prior to her first year in college and then again as a student. Alondra discussed the second set of results in her interview. She mentioned her Top 5 talents did not all resonate with her immediately. In fact, Alondra was surprised that some were in her Top 5 due to a lack of understanding. Alondra grew her

**Table 1**

*Participant Characteristics*

Name	Age	Academic standing	Gender identity	Race/Ethnicity	Low-income	Study site
Alondra	20	Junior	Female	Latinx	Yes	1
Devan	20	Junior	Male	White	Yes	1
Jacqueline	21	Senior	Female	Black/African American	Yes	2
Karl	21	Junior	Male	Asian or Pacific Islander	Yes	2
Paige	21	Senior	Female	White	Yes	3
Ryen	21	Senior	Female	White	No	2
Sarah	21	Junior	Female	White	No	1

**Table 2**

*Participant Top 5 Talent Themes*

Name	1st Talent	2nd Talent	3rd Talent	4th Talent	5th Talent
Alondra	Harmony	Restorative	Individualization	Context	Connectedness
Devan	Competition	Maximizer	Strategic	Achiever	Futuristic
Jacqueline	Achiever	Relator	Competition	Significance	Focus
Karl	Maximizer	Individualization	Ideation	Significance	Command
Paige	Input	Connectedness	Empathy	Developer	Context
Ryen	Input	Achiever	Context	Intellection	Connectedness
Sarah	Futuristic	Learner	Individualization	Achiever	Woo

understanding over time as she learned more about herself and became a mentor to incoming students in her scholarship program.

While Alondra was a student, administrators of her scholarship program invested in the CliftonStrengths® program. Upper-class students were trained to be mentors and coaches. Alondra was invited to take part in the program, first as a mentor, then as a coach. This opportunity consisted of a semester-long course to teach concepts of strengths-based development and learn to coach others. Alondra was provided the opportunity to coach her peers, practice coaching professional staff, and be coached monthly. Alondra developed a depth of knowledge and appreciation for strengths-based development through this experience. She began to support incoming students in learning about and applying their unique strengths. As someone with a strength of Individualization, Alondra appreciated the opportunity to identify the uniqueness of others and partner with them to thrive in their college experience. In her mind, this only affirmed her major and career path.

### **Devan**

Devan was a junior majoring in management with a Top 5 talent sequence of Competition®, Maximizer®, Strategic®, Achiever®, and Futuristic®. As an in-state student, the university was 15 minutes from his home. He chose his university because he received a scholarship specifically for first-generation college students. After Pell grants, his scholarship almost covered the full cost of attendance for 5 years. This scholarship program also included a community that met regularly, a learning community, and connected course sections. Devan took pride in the fact that he learned to navigate the scholarship and college admission processes on his own. He felt these experiences served him well in the transition to college life.

After taking the CliftonStrengths® assessment as a 1st-year student, Devan became heavily involved in strengths-based programs offered in his business school. At first, not all of Devan's top talent themes resonated with him. He spent time developing an understanding of each theme in the assessment and began to embrace his unique talents. Devan began exploring his strengths in a 1st-year class called "Investing in Strengths." He appreciated that he was able to take the class with other scholarship recipients in a much smaller discussion group as a first-generation student in his scholarship program.

After completing the initial class, Devan applied to become a strengths coach. Once accepted, he enrolled in a course to train as a student-strengths coach. Devan participated in this semester-long class with approximately 50 other students who were also admitted into the "highly selective" program. In this class, Devan developed an in-depth understanding of the 34 CliftonStrengths® talent themes and how to formally teach others in classes and coaching conversations. As a part of this class, Devan also received one-on-one coaching from campus administrators who were certified Gallup strengths coaches.

After completing many hours of training, he served as a coach for students in his learning community. Devan deepened his own self-awareness while helping others through this experience. He also saw strengths in the community to forge connections. Devan had the unique experience to discuss CliftonStrengths® with individuals who had worked for the Gallup Organization and moved away from the United States while he traveled abroad. Devan reflected on the fact that his collegiate experience would have looked much different if not for his involvement in strengths-based programs. He found great value in the opportunities he was provided over his first few years as a student.

## **Jacqueline**

Jacqueline was a senior majoring in organizational leadership with a Top 5 talent sequence of Achiever®, Relator®, Competition®, Significance®, and Focus®. Like Alondra, she was an in-state student and participated in a pre-college program that led her to her chosen university. As the first in her family to attend a university, Jacqueline felt a sense of responsibility and drive to succeed. This was even though she felt the label of being a first-generation college student caused people to underestimate her. She said, “People kind of see me as someone to kind of watch, as if I don’t have the means to do well.” This feeling was in direct contrast to many of her talent themes and drove her to complete a degree at a campus where she did not always feel welcomed.

Administrators at Jacqueline’s university provided the CliftonStrengths® assessment to all incoming 1st-year students, so she was introduced to the program early in her college career. Though she took the assessment early, Jacqueline did not understand or do anything with her results until participating in an exploratory program for undecided majors that touched on the results of the assessment. When reading her results and learning about her top talent themes, Jacqueline expressed a sense of shock as to the specificity and accuracy of her results. She felt validated by the results themselves and the confirmation she received from peers when discussing her results in various strengths-based activities.

Jacqueline’s primary exposure to strengths-based development occurred through her involvement in a student engagement office on her campus. The office hosted a spring break service trip, which included a focus on CliftonStrengths®. Jacqueline attended for 3 consecutive years. On those trips, she learned more about her talents and the talents of other participants on the trip and was able to discuss and apply CliftonStrengths on a team and toward project goals.

There were in-depth strengths discussions, activities, worksheets, and a grid of all the strengths in the group, which Jacqueline found insightful and instructive. Through that same office, Jacqueline led community service days around campus. All members on her team discussed and leveraged strengths throughout their work. These experiences helped Jacqueline see how her talents could help her succeed in college and her career.

## **Karl**

Karl was a junior majoring in cybersecurity and network engineering with a Top 5 talent sequence of Maximizer®, Individualization®, Ideation®, Significance®, and Command®. Karl was an out-of-state student and a first-generation college student. He was also a first-generation American, as he received his citizenship after immigrating to the United States several years earlier. Karl reflected that his status as first generation held a lot of weight. He also had a unique experience of residing in the liminal space of an immigrant student, not feeling as if he fit in with either the American or international students. This sense of isolation made his initial collegiate experience challenging, especially when experiencing academic setbacks in his first semester.

Karl completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment upon entering his university. Like Alondra, Karl did not embrace all of his top talent themes, specifically Maximizer and Command. He continued to develop a better understanding of these results through his work teaching 1st-year students about CliftonStrengths. Though he expressed skepticism to some themes such as Maximizer, he made multiple references to “being the best of the best,” which is a core component of that theme (Gallup, Inc, 2021b).

Karl did not learn about or leverage his CliftonStrengths® results in his first year. Then, a campus administrator recommended a 2-day developmental retreat in his second year. Karl attended the retreat and examined his Top 5 talents, and those of others, with support from

upper-class students and staff. Due to this experience, Karl felt more confident and unique. He applied to be a student leader at the retreat the following year. His experience as an instructor was different because the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic required the transition to a virtual environment. Regardless, Karl was able to successfully serve as an instructor. When reflecting on the use of his talents of Individualization and Command, he said, “I try to see each uniqueness of the people in the class and try to take control of the situation, the COVID situation. I tried to make sure everyone enjoyed themselves.” Though he did not have as many experiences with CliftonStrengths as other interview participants, Karl had a strong ability to reflect on his talents and identify how they helped him thus far in his collegiate experience.

### **Paige**

Paige was a senior majoring in education with a Top 5 talent sequence of Input®, Connectedness®, Empathy®, Developer®, and Context®. Paige was an in-state student and the first in her family to move away from home to attend a university. When beginning her journey as a student, Paige and her parents benefited greatly from the orientation program at her university. Her appreciation of the insight provided to first-generations students and their families by the orientation program led her to join the orientation team. Her experience as an orientation leader and in other student organizations piqued her interest in a potential career in student affairs.

As an orientation leader, Paige completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment. Because Paige became an orientation leader her junior year, she was the only study participant who completed the assessment later in her collegiate experience. Though this was not the first personality or psychometric test she completed, Paige identified deeply with her CliftonStrengths



results. She expressed the assessment helped her to understand more about what makes her unique and confirmed for her that this uniqueness was, in fact, a good thing.

Paige mainly experienced strengths-based development activities in her orientation role. The concepts were integrated into her training program and discussed both formally in evaluations and informally in one-on-one meetings with staff. Additionally, she and her coworkers had a list of each person's strengths and other assessment results. Paige used the knowledge of her strengths to enhance her ability to succeed in her student organizations, internships, and work environment. She also used the self-awareness she developed through strengths-based development to better serve herself in emotionally charged situations. Paige discussed the idea of self-awareness through her strengths of Empathy, Connectedness, and Developer multiple times in her reflections. Each of these talent themes focuses on relationship building.

## **Ryen**

Ryen was a senior majoring in public relations and strategic communications with a Top 5 talent sequence of Input®, Achiever®, Context®, Intellection®, and Connectedness®. Ryen grew up in a small town about 30 minutes from her university. Ryen's mother worked at the university. The tuition discount she received because of her mother's employment was a significant deciding factor as to why Ryen chose to attend. As a first-generation college student, Ryen expressed she sometimes felt alienated, specifically from faculty. She believed the assumption was that you came from a college-educated background. Since her parents both worked at organizations where one might assume they had college degrees, Ryen allowed people to draw that conclusion and sometimes hid her first-generation status. Ryen said, "I feel like sometimes I kind of just say those vague titles because I felt like if I said my parents just

graduated high school [people would think], well then how are you here.” Her status as first generation did provide the perspective that getting a degree does not make you superior to others, rather it can assist you in supporting your community. This was a consistent theme throughout the interview.

Ryen completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment upon entry to her university but, like Jacqueline, did not leverage her results until spring semester of her first year. Her roommate recommended a Strengths 101 workshop offered by the leadership development office. In this workshop, she identified and connected to what she described as the “positive qualities about you.” She also attended with friends and expressed that having others affirm her top talents was an important part of embracing those talents as uniquely her.

Due to her experience, Ryen became involved with the leadership development office. The office leadership ran a strengths-based team, so Ryen was able to talk about and leverage her talents on a regular basis. She received informal coaching and feedback that was strengths-based. She also planned projects with teammates according to the specific talents on the team.

Beyond the office environment, Ryen also saw strengths in the community by participating in a program that connected students to community members through the lenses of community engagement and strengths. Additionally, Ryen was the one study participant who had a faculty member in a non-strengths-based class leverage CliftonStrengths® in the classroom. Because all incoming students completed the assessment, a faculty member in one communication class requested to see student’s results and spoke to them in assignments and classroom activities. These two experiences allowed Ryen to see how CliftonStrengths could be leveraged in multiple areas of her life and reinforced her commitment to use her talents and education to give back to her community.

## **Sarah**

Sarah was a junior majoring in management with a Top 5 talent sequence of Futuristic®, Learner®, Individualization®, Achiever®, and Woo®. As an out-of-state student, she chose to attend her university because she was admitted into the business school and felt connected to the campus after visiting with her mother and sister. Sarah stated that being identified as a first-generation college student by her university made her want to jump in and get involved at the start of her first year. She became heavily involved on campus by joining a sorority, an entrepreneurship club, and, eventually, the campus CliftonStrengths® organization as president.

As a first-generation student, Sarah participated in a weekend orientation program where she first completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment. She completed it again a few weeks later in her Investing in Strengths class, and her results resonated with her. Sarah said, “I think it made me feel actually a lot better and more confident in who I was, and I also thought it was just interesting to finally figure out what I do and why I do it.” Her talent of Individualization reverberated through her interview. Sarah was both interested in what makes her unique and in the uniqueness of others.

In the 8-week long Investing in Strengths course, Sarah learned about strengths-based development and her own top talents. She also received coaching. Sarah stated she immediately applied to be a coach. She felt she could do a better job as a coach than the student who worked with her. Becoming a coach allowed Sarah to deepen her understanding of CliftonStrengths® by working with others and being coached by professional staff who were certified coaches. Through a different program at her school, Sarah completed a 4-week program specifically focused on strengths-based leadership. Sarah gained a unique perspective on how to leverage her

talents in leadership roles. As a result of her experiences, Sarah identified the various ways she leveraged her top talents in her work, student organizations, and everyday life with relative ease.

### **Overview of Superordinate and Subordinate Themes**

Through the interview analysis, I developed initial superordinate themes. I discussed the initial superordinate themes with focus group participants. From those discussions, five superordinate themes emerged with two subordinate themes for each. I summarize the breakdown of themes and subthemes in Table 3.

**Table 3**

*Superordinate and Subordinate Themes*

Superordinate theme	Subordinate themes
1. It's Just Natural for Me	a) Like a Bear Hug b) Understanding Increases Over Time
2. With Whom I Spend My Time	a) This is Who I Am b) Finding the Right Partners
3. Leveraging My Strengths	a) Confidence to Step Up b) Recommended to Apply
4. Helped Me Along My Path	a) Confirm or Adjust b) Supported By Coaching
5. Finding Community Through Strengths	a) Campus Communities b) Beyond the Campus Boundaries

#### **It's Just Natural for Me**

The experience of completing the CliftonStrengths® assessment and receiving results was different for each participant. Differences included when they completed the assessment, in what context, and how their results were debriefed, if at all. Three participants completed the assessment upon college entry because it was required of all 1st-year students. The rest were involved in academic or campus programs that required assessment completion.

Some participants resonated deeply with one or more top talent themes upon reading their results; others did not think about their results until later in their college careers. In the focus

group, Devan stated, “After you’ve learned about them, after you’ve kind of figured out what they meant, and maybe after a couple of coaching sessions, then you really kind of feel that they’re natural.” This statement implies that receiving results is just the start of a longer process, which takes place over time. Though initial reactions to CliftonStrengths results may be positive and encouraging, these feelings and their impact may be fleeting. Two subordinate themes emerged within It’s Just Natural for Me. These were Like a Bear Hug and Understanding Increases Over Time.

### ***Like a Bear Hug***

Many participants felt a strong initial impact from the assessment results. The experience of reading a description of who they are and what makes them unique affected them in a positive and personal way. Sarah summed it up well when she said, “And so I think it’s been like kind of a bear hug, a little bit like a bear hug. [Be]cause at the end of the day it’s just kind of you and your college dorm.” Sarah went on to say that knowing why she does certain things is important to her, even though she would likely have behaved similarly in college without knowing her results. The assessment provided her with those explanations.

Sarah was able to explain her current experiences by developing an understanding of how her top talents impacted her actions. It also provided clarity to her past behaviors, no matter how small. When reflecting on her high school track team, she said, “I think it’s also my Individualization [talent]. I knew my track teammates so well that I knew who was going to forget their shorts. I already knew who was going to need help.” Individualization is a talent that naturally understands the uniqueness of others and uses that to build relationships (Gallup, Inc., 2021b). By reflecting on her past experiences, Sarah was able to see how this specific talent could aid in her current work and future career.

Paige had an even sharper emotional reaction to her overall results, saying:

So, whenever I got the results and actually started reading the descriptions, I cried because it was just one of those things where it explained the way that I thought, [be]cause not a lot of people, at least in my experiences think the same way that I do. So, it was just a really cool way to kind of more self-identify and understand who I am.

Even though Paige completed the assessment later in her college career, it had a major effect on how she saw her place on campus and in her work environments. When describing her Empathy talent, she said:

Empathy was one of those things that I felt that I had more disconnect with the older I've gotten because for me, I've been hurt so much by people around me. So, I was like, I don't want to be an empath anymore. But after reading it, I realized how much of a strength it is for me and that I'm still an empathetic person.

Paige experienced a significant impact seeing a talent she had tried to avoid or repress appear as something innate in her. This helped Paige realize that she should embrace what makes her unique because it is natural to her. Without seeing the Empathy talent in her Top 5 talents, Paige may have rejected a part of her that she could leverage in her work as an educator.

When talking about the initial impact of her results, Jacqueline said, "This test, everyone should do it." This was a common refrain of all participants. Participants felt CliftonStrengths® is a valuable tool for both first-generation college students and students from all backgrounds because it provides an opportunity to connect with one's own talents and those of classmates and friends. When describing the emotions she experienced when reading her assessment results, Jacqueline stated, "Validation, happiness, excitement. It was a really good feeling. I didn't really have a negative feeling about it." She went on to elaborate that the assessment "opened [her] eyes and validated like, this is you and this is how you are." Ryen expanded on this idea by saying, "It was just really cool to hear these are the positive qualities about you and I felt like I identified so closely with them." Validation was an important component of this subordinate

theme. Most participants did not experience an overwhelming sense of surprise when reviewing their results. Rather, participants experienced a clarity and recognition of talents they already recognized within themselves, providing the feeling of a bear hug.

### ***Understanding Increases Over Time***

While participants felt validation from their CliftonStrengths® results, some were unclear or lacked the confidence to actively use their talents in their lives. Their clarity and confidence may be impacted by engaging in strengths-based activities over time. After feeling “a little shocked that Maximizer [was his] top [strength],” Karl said the following about his Top 5 talents after participating in strengths-based development activities:

It kind of gave me a boost because sometimes I was super not confident first semester . . . especially after a lot of hits and not doing so well in the new environment . . . I’m not unique at all, but now Top 5 strengths kind of just let me know that this is your strengths. You know, you have this in yourself . . . and I tried to discover this Top 5 in myself, just so I can present them in some way.

Karl developed a deeper understanding of his results, which he used to see how he could succeed in college and embrace talents that may have surprised him initially.

Like Karl, Alondra initially struggled to see how Context, a talent theme that looks to the past to inform current decisions, could be considered a strength. Then, after she spent time learning about the theme of Context, she said, “That’s what I do all the time and that’s how I make my decisions . . . And so, I really like that strength now, it’s one of my favorites actually.” Sometimes it takes time to see the value of a specific talent and begin to use it to your advantage; however, after working with her strengths for several years, Alondra said, “I just feel really confident with them because I can tell how they work with me.” The development of confidence came alongside the investment of time into participants’ understanding of their strengths.

Devan gave a good summary of the years spent working with his CliftonStrengths®. He said, “I feel like they’ve kind of grown with me, but I don’t think they’ve changed. I think it takes time to learn about them and kind of figure out what they are.” Devan went on to say, “Sometimes you don’t realize it right away, but then having the different experiences has helped kind of unpack those and learn more about them.”

Over time, each participant understood their Top 5 talent sequence as both unique and natural and felt confident due to this understanding. Their initial reaction to learning their CliftonStrengths® results was just the beginning of their strengths-based development experience. To get to a complete sense that their Top 5 talents are a natural part of their personality, each participant needed to invest time in their own strengths-based development. As Sarah explained, “Until you tell someone these are things that you naturally do, they don’t put that word to it until it is given to them in some type of lesson.” Learning beyond solely reading personal results helped participants increase understanding over time.

### **With Whom I Spend My Time**

As participants better understood their CliftonStrengths® results, they also became more selective about with whom they spent time and why they chose to do so. These decisions were both personal and practical. Many became more confident in who they were and unapologetic when a friendship or partnership no longer suited them. At times, this separation occurred because they wanted to surround themselves with like-minded individuals. Other times, it was due to a growth in confidence and self-awareness.

Additionally, participants valued knowing the top talents of others. They used this knowledge to increase their own and their team’s likelihood of success. In the focus group, Sarah defined this theme as “that’s how you kind of decide if this person is going to be someone who



you want on your team or not.” Two subordinate themes that emerged within With Whom I Spend My Time are entitled This Is Who I Am and Finding the Right Partners.

### ***This Is Who I Am***

Participation in CliftonStrengths® assessment strengths-based development programs is meant to help an individual understand what makes them unique and how their top talents help them accomplish their goals. As a first-generation college student, Ryen felt alienated at times because of this part of her identity; however, she benefited from developing self-awareness over what makes her distinctive. She said:

So, I feel like my entire perspective shifted like, okay, I’m not super analytical and that’s ok because these are the things that I contribute to the team. There can be other people that are analytical, and I still can do that but maybe I’m better at looking at that information and saying, okay, here’s how it connects to this or put it in context with everything else that’s happening.

Ryen’s self-awareness of where she contributed best to a team allowed her to stop trying to fix perceived weaknesses and stay at a “neutral place.” She also became confident in positioning herself to contribute to teams in ways that aligned with her talents.

Jacqueline expanded on this sense of self-awareness when describing the wording in her results report. She said, “This test kinda opened my eyes and validated this is you and this is how you are and being confident about it, to being confident about who you are as a person.”

Jacqueline also mentioned that learning more about her talents allowed her to better share her story. This was key to entering new environments. She went on to say the following about working with others:

Sometimes I feel like, should I just step back a little? [Am I] a bit too much for people or I’m a little too outspoken, but I’m like no, I’m going to be myself. These are my strengths [this] is where this works well, it doesn’t work for you, sorry. But, we can communicate how we can work together because, you know, some people don’t work well with outgoing people, so how can we work together to be our best self and our best team [by] working together.

Reading and reflecting on her results allowed Jacqueline to feel more confident being herself and communicating to others how she could contribute to a team. She recognized the value of her unique talents instead of viewing those parts of herself as ones she should hold back or limit.

Many participants expressed developing confidence in who they are and how this helped their relationships. When talking about her talent of Individualization, Alondra said, “Apparently, it’s not normal [for] every single person to know, to remember little tiny details about people . . . but I would remember those little things and bring them up.” Alondra learned this is a unique aspect of the Individualization talent. She said, “I guess it’s not a trait that everyone has.” She became more confident in herself and how she could use this talent in her life. She said the following about her experience at a predominantly White institution:

It can be really scary for a lot of multicultural first-generation [students]. I think that like takes away a lot of your confidence, when you were once so sure of yourself . . . but those strengths are able to give you the confidence that you have something with you that really can’t leave you and you can’t really just leave it. So, it’s always giving you something to be strong, to rely back on.

Participants became more confident in who they are when they learned about their talents beyond the initial report reading. They also became more intentional in their relationships and partnerships.

### ***Finding the Right Partners***

As participants continued their journey with strengths-based development, they began to consider who the right people might be to collaborate with to accomplish their work. Sarah explained that by choosing to work with people possessing specific talent themes, she was more productive and connected to them over time. She stated:

So, I go to people who have like competition and achiever and strategic and futuristic and just like a lot of executing strengths. And it makes me a better worker in the workspace

when I do that. And when that happens, there's a bond that comes between that friend group and myself that I can lean on them no matter what, and they can lean on me.

Sarah has the talents of Individualization and Woo, which stands for winning others over. She has a specific skill for growing her social network through understanding the uniqueness of others. She claims to do this with or without the knowledge of people's top talent themes; however, she can more easily make decisions about who to spend time when she does know them. Sarah also explained that connecting with friends with talents she does not have in her Top 5 helps her grow as well. She said:

I think that friendships do become stronger when you choose people based on their strengths a little bit, or you can even learn more about others. One of my best friends has empathy and I teach her how to handle her emotions better and she teaches me to be more empathetic. So, it could work that way too.

By consciously interacting with individuals who have different Top 5 talents, Sarah was able to develop a better understanding of those talents. She also gained insight into how she could improve in those areas or partner with those who had talents that complemented hers.

Like Sarah, Devan said "I'm really focused on, you know, people that are like me . . . I think for me it is focused on people that are similar and have [the] same mindset." He spoke about the need to surround himself with people who are strategic and similarly driven to succeed. He went on to say, "I think that's been a cool thing of figuring out how can you meet people that are like you and have the same similar strengths as you from way different backgrounds." In Devan's mind, the CliftonStrengths® assessment is a great way to meet a diverse group of people while still surrounding oneself with those who have similar talent themes.

When reflecting on partnerships, Alondra mentioned:

Really just knowing people's strengths really helps me also, [be]cause I can choose a good group of people to work with, with whatever I'm doing, whether it's like a project or whether it's just hanging out and trying to squeeze something in last minute.

Alondra used her strengths-based knowledge to become more effective in accomplishing work. She realized the value in partnering with individuals who possess different Top 5 talents so everyone can contribute in their own unique way.

These three participants were involved in specific strengths-based programs on their campus, but others found opportunities to leverage strengths-based knowledge in teams. Ryan spoke about a student group she joined. She said:

The leadership team would sit down. Here are all our strengths . . . it kind of used it as a baseline to divvy up projects and how to like, determine who works best with one another on different types of tasks.

The more exposure participants had to learning about their talents in relation to the talents of others, the more particular they became about spending time with individuals who could help them reach their goals inside and outside the classroom.

### **Leveraging My Strengths**

As growth through participation in strengths-based development continued and they surrounded themselves with partners who supported their goals, participants began to think about how to leverage strengths in their lives. Participants' deeper understanding of their strengths validated their sense of self and encouraged them to step into leadership roles, apply for different jobs, and speak up in spaces they may not have done so before. They used this knowledge to decline or step away from opportunities that did not align with their talents. As Sarah said in the focus group, "I can say no to things that are not going to give me energy."

Additionally, faculty and staff encouraged participants to seek various opportunities based on their top talents. Most participants took on strengths-based leadership roles, including coaching, teaching, and student organization leadership because it was recommended to them.

Two subordinate themes that emerged within Leveraging My Strengths were Confidence to Step Up and Recommended to Apply.

### ***Confidence to Step Up***

Self-confidence was a critical aspect of participants' experience with strengths-based development. Confidence in who they are and what they could do appeared to grow alongside an increase in strengths awareness. Ryen said:

Before I understood my strengths, I always felt weird and kind of insecure about the fact that in social situations I couldn't just think of a response or, you know, be on my toes. And it made me feel like the experiences I was having were justified . . . It just made me feel like it wasn't weird that I had these experiences. There was a reason that I acted the way that I did, or I saw the world the way that I did and it just kind of gave that level of comfort like, these are my strengths, this is why I'm good at the things I'm good at, even if there are situations that I struggle with.

Ryen reflected on the fact that her way of viewing the world is unique, not abnormal. While she may feel challenged in certain social situations, she used her talents to succeed in other areas. She went on to say, "I feel like I was always just putting myself in places where I could use my strengths . . . and kind of being more of an advocate [for] like, this is what I'm good at."

Karl added to this when he said:

I try to present this like Top 5 terms to other people to let them know I have this Top 5 within me without explicitly tell[ing] them that. But I tell them I do well both in a team and by myself, I try to make sure I know the unique[ness] between each other.

Participants learned to position themselves to contribute to areas where they could leverage top talents in strengths-based development. This helped participants become more confident in their ability to succeed.

Alondra spoke directly to her strengths-based work in an example from an interaction with a leader of a council of multicultural fraternities and sororities. She stated she spoke up as a leader of her organization, and he reacted negatively. She then felt less inclined to help solve

problems and withdrew. Alondra said, “Once I was able to learn more about my strengths, be a little more confident, I think that’s what helped me speak up again and then got me to a higher position to where I am now.” This was a good example of Alondra leaning into her theme of Restorative. She has an ability to see problems and enjoys putting in work to solve those problems.

Alondra also spoke frequently about the confidence she gained when she learned about her talent theme of Harmony. She said, “Once I did learn about my strengths and I’m just like, okay, I’m more confident in stepping into these debates and these harder conversations that are coming in, because I like just knowing that it’s a strength for [me].” Paige summed up the theme of strengths helping confidence. She said, “I think the more that I understand myself, the more confident that I am as a person and how I can navigate the world.” She added that knowing others may have similar top talents helped her feel less alone in the way she viewed the world. These feelings of capability and connection to others built through strengths might support first-generation college students throughout their collegiate careers. These students may also use these feelings to encourage themselves to step into new opportunities.

### ***Recommended to Apply***

Participants engaged with faculty and staff who understood strengths-based frameworks. They helped the students take advantage of opportunities to continue to develop on campus and grow in the successful use of their top talents. Staff or faculty who spent significant time leveraging the CliftonStrengths® assessment were available at each study site, including some Gallup-certified coaches. They supported their students’ strengths-based journey.

Jacqueline spoke to this subordinate theme when she said:

I think also being around professionals, like adults that can see who you are as a person, they provided opportunities for me like, “Oh we know Jackie is going to excel at this. We

know Jackie is going to do X, Y, and Z, let's put her here, Let's put her in this program or recommend her for this," you know. So, I received a lot of things from people that are familiar with the strengths' tests and stuff like that and just been coaches.

She was clear that many of her opportunities throughout her undergraduate career resulted from a staff member knowing her unique set of talents. Staff helped to position her in the right roles to grow. Sarah added, "I was thinking that the most rewarding things in college have been by a recommendation."

While Karl was earlier in his strengths journey than other participants, both his experiences were born out of recommendations or encouragement to apply. He was invited to participate in a strengths-development retreat by a staff member in his college office who knew him. After participating in the program and connecting with additional staff, Karl was encouraged to take a leadership role in the program. Karl said, "So they offer [the] thing. Hey, do you want to take the role of higher classman helping next year's students? I was like, definitely." This is a good example of Karl leaning into his Top 5 talent theme of Significance—he was motivated by opportunities that appear important and make an impact on those around him. Karl benefited from his connection to staff who knew his top talents. Due to his role as higher classman, Karl stayed connected to others while at home during the ongoing pandemic as he taught virtually.

Alondra served as a mentor in her scholarship program. She was trained to talk about the CliftonStrengths® assessment as it became more engrained in her community. Based on her work as a mentor in her scholarship program, Alondra was offered the opportunity to do more as both a mentor and a coach in her program. She said, "I have been a mentor and now they're going to start having mentors and coaches. And they've been wanting me to do both now for the upcoming fall." Like Karl, Alondra was observed using her talents in her work by faculty and

staff. She was encouraged to take on a new opportunity based on the impact she had on students in the program. Many participants were presented with new opportunities due to a connection to strengths-focused staff or faculty or a direct recommendation to apply and take on a new role, regardless of where they were in their strengths-development journey.

### **Helped Me Along My Path**

Participants were clarifying or confirming post-graduation plans and goals as their journey from completing the CliftonStrengths® assessment to participation in various strengths-based programs progressed. They used their experiences with their strengths to reflect on their majors and future careers and to understand why they were or were not interested in their chosen plans. Some participants confirmed their choices aligned with how they could leverage their strengths. Others adjusted their plans based on several factors, including their unique distribution of talents. Some participants could also see how their talents helped them confidently choose a direction. When speaking specifically about her talents, Jacqueline said, “I think, you know, the Focus and the Achiever definitely helped navigate me through everything to really help me figure out what I wanted to do.”

Participants used strengths-based development both as a tool on the journey and a blueprint for identifying fulfilling future roles. In most cases, access to coaching from other students, informally with staff, or formally with a certified coach supported their ability to figure out their path. While not available to every participant, those who did receive coaching expressed it was a key component in their development. Two subordinate themes that emerged within Helped Me Along My Path are entitled Confirm or Adjust and Supported by Coaching.



### *Confirm or Adjust*

Engaging in strengths-based development frequently provides opportunities for reflection. Taking a step back and looking at their results helped participants understand why they might like certain things more than others. Devan entered college with experience managing others at work, so he was aware of his interest in business. However, many potential majors existed. He said:

I got into strengths and then that opened up the door for the management [major] . . . I think my experience in my job as a supervisor has helped, but then also learning about my strengths. I think those are pretty management focused.

Devan felt he was on a good path because he understood his talents and how they lent themselves to success in his chosen major.

Paige discussed her theme of Developer as one that helped her recognize that she liked the idea of helping others learn and grow. She said, “Developer really hit towards my desire to be a teacher and helping people and understanding others around me and wanting to help build them up.” This was clear in her choice to become an orientation leader. She was able to help students and their families get acclimated and excited about her campus. Paige added, “I think that it’s helped me kind of redefine what it means to be a teacher, and where I want to teach and [with] what parameters.” By leveraging her talents, Paige realized childhood education was not the path for her. She wanted to devote her time to developing college students.

Some participants made big changes in their future trajectory, in part because of their experiences with strengths-based development. Alondra realized she was more interested in supporting children and families than pursuing business. She said:

I really wanted to do business just because everyone else thought it’d be a good idea. But when I really looked into my strengths, it was a lot [of] relationship building and strategic thinking. So when I chose my major now, which is working with kids and working with families and having a lot of interactions with people, I actually enjoy the work I’m doing

now . . . So the strengths test really did confirm like, oh yeah, I should keep my child, youth, and family studies major and stop trying to force something else that I'm not going to do so well at like I'm doing in this other group and this other major.

Alondra used her experiences with strengths to take a reflective look at her chosen path. She used what she learned about her talents to recognize where she might be more successful and find more enjoyment in her work.

Ryen was frank about how her work with strengths impacted her choices throughout college. When asked how she feels today about her Top 5 talents, Ryen said, "I feel like they have completely shaped the path that I'm going forward on." Initially, she wanted to major in political science but realized she did not want to be the face in front of the crowd. Ryen said, "When I learned more about my strengths and really took kind of an introspective [look at] what it is I want to do in the world. And that came down to using my education to help others." Her reflection allowed her to look at her talents of Input, Achiever, and Connectedness and reframe how she could help her community with her new public relations major. Different college experiences inform students' future trajectory; however, these participants showed how strengths-based development can be part of one's decision-making process to confirm or adjust the path on which they travel.

### ***Supported by Coaching***

Participants could engage in strengths-based development in many ways on their campuses. Some received coaching from other students, experienced staff and faculty, or certified strengths coaches; others become coaches themselves. Students who received coaching or coached others found those experiences to provide significant insight into their talents and support in their ongoing development. Sarah said, "So you can give a student the strengths but

without coaching them or teaching them what this means they are lost. And it's just another assignment and a piece of paper.”

She was clear that the opportunity to be coached or to coach others was a key component to developing a strengths-based mindset on campus. Sarah continued:

I think it's important that everyone who has taken the time to invest in strengths needs to constantly be coached, because we're constantly evolving within strengths and we need to learn that and learn how to apply it to the next stages in our life.

Sarah believed each student needs to be supported by an individual along their strengths journey, whether a staff or faculty member or another student. Others agreed. The status of the coach was not critical. The person needed an understanding of the CliftonStrengths® framework. When reflecting on his experiences with being coached by a certified coach, Devan said, “I'd say it was more self-discovery than anything, I'd say it was very similar to the student coach.” In a sense, the opportunity to talk with another person one-on-one mattered most.

Coaching could also happen in a campus office. Jacqueline reflected on working with a coordinator in an office where she was involved. She said:

It was always a discussion about strengths. And I always appreciated that, [be]cause sometimes I don't necessarily see it. Sometimes my Focus strength. I never really see that, but when other people bring it up, like, oh okay. Yeah, that makes sense.

While Jacqueline had informal coaching in her involvement on campus, CliftonStrengths® was integrated into Paige's work as an orientation leader. Paige had a unique experience of talking about her talents in performance evaluations. Like Devan, the opportunity for one-on-one coaching had a large impact on her understanding and use of strengths. Paige said:

It helped me kind of really see where I actually am successful in and where my strengths actually truly play out. But it also made me think about how to apply my strengths in ways that I hadn't before and really understanding how to connect to people in a different way.

This experience allowed Paige to see how to lean into her strengths or adjust their use to be successful in her work. This, plus ongoing interactions with her coworkers, allowed Paige to grow in self-awareness and understand how her talents could serve her in the future.

Some participants became coaches to other students. They felt those experiences helped them grow in self-awareness. Devan said that when he would coach another student, he would think “what kind of strengths can I use to really guide the conversation.” Devan’s reflection helped him better understand his own talents even when he was helping others.

Alondra also spoke about how she used her talents in her coaching sessions. She said, “A lot of my relationship building strengths really helped me out a lot. That’s what I realized is every time I’m coaching someone, I feel like I have to go back to one of them.” Alondra specifically mentioned her talent theme of Context, which she used to reflect on ways she posed certain questions in the past to elicit better answers in the present. This direct naming and application of talents was common from Alondra and others who had been coached or coached others. It was apparent that opportunities to engage in strengths-based development in one-on-one settings allowed participants to reflect on their talents and use their talents intentionally along their developmental path.

### **Finding Community Through Strengths**

Each participant went on a unique strengths-based journey; however, one experience they each had was interacting with strengths-focused communities on or off campus. It was clear from each participant that none would have utilized their results unless they engaged with a strengths-based community. This was true whether they took the assessment as an incoming 1st-year student or through a campus department or job. In fact, Ryen, Jacqueline, and Karl all attested to

the fact that they did not think much, if at all, about their results until they participated in their first strengths-based activity.

Karl's CliftonStrengths® journey was sidetracked by the pandemic and attending school from home. However, when Karl reflected on his experience teaching a virtual strengths-based course, he expressed a desire to stay involved. Karl said, "Returning back to the communities is the top of my goals because I think they helped me a lot. That's why I want to return back to them." Jacqueline added, "Once I went into the [redacted] office, I was real comfortable talking about strengths because that's what they talk about all the time." Being surrounded by a community of individuals working on their own strengths journey, or supporting students doing the same, created a critical support structure for participants. They were encouraged to leverage their talents every day. Two subordinate themes emerged within Finding Community Through Strengths. These are entitled Campus Communities and Beyond the Campus Boundaries.

### ***Campus Communities***

Each study site built a strengths-based community through programs that supported strengths across the campus. These communities could be tied to an academic area of study, an office on campus, or a scholarship program. Each created an environment where participants felt comfortable talking about their top talent themes and learning about others.

One drawback to a strengths-based development program is that participants struggled to discuss their talents with others outside these communities. They needed to learn ways to communicate about talents with language not tied to the CliftonStrengths® assessment. As Jacqueline said, "In terms of all the other communities that I've been in, nobody really knows their strengths. I can't really have a conversation about strengths, it's kinda like, why are you

talking about strengths right now.” This demonstrates that if a student is going to grow in the knowledge and use of their talents, they need others with whom to grow.

Alondra found community through strengths as use of the assessment grew in her scholarship program. As a mentor in the program, she completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment so she could take a class designed to help her support incoming 1st-year students process their results. When reflecting on participating in the class with other mentors, Alondra said, “It really got us to know each other a lot more than what we used to know [about] each other.” She added her mentees did not take the class with her, but she would discuss the class with them. Alondra said:

They told me their strengths and I could talk a little bit more about their strengths and see how I can see it in them because I got to know my mentees on a more personal level instead of just academics.

The strengths community in Alondra’s scholarship program allowed her to become more confident in her understanding and use of her talents and build deeper relationships.

Ryen’s roommate invited her to a strengths-based workshop hosted by an office on campus. After that experience, Ryen became heavily involved in the office’s work. She described the office members talking about CliftonStrengths® as others might talk about horoscopes. Ryen said a common type of refrain would be “Oh that’s such an Input thing to say . . . that’s so typical.” When reflecting on strengths discussions in everyday conversation, Ryen said, “That was really interesting [be]cause I got a lot more comfortable with not only understanding my own but starting to understand other people and seeing the similarities and difference in how they feed off of each other.” Ryen added the impact of that experience solidified her strengths awareness and helped her feel like she was growing in areas where she

could be successful. Similar to Alondra, it was the community members around Ryen who encouraged a continued investment of time into her top talents.

As a coach and leader of a strengths-based student organization, Sarah was heavily involved in strengths-based communities through her academic program. She demonstrated how community members supported each other beyond the program itself. Sara said:

I have found that a lot of our coaches kind of tend to register for the same classes at the same time. And whenever we do group projects you'll have four or five groups of just coaches, like in a marketing class . . . So, I think that's how our community kind of spreads throughout the years is that it spreads into our classrooms more, which is super fun.

She added that these groups work well together because they all understood their own and each other's talents. This understanding allows them to know how to best accomplish the work.

Participants' work with CliftonStrengths® helps them in their communities, classrooms, and office teams. Across all participants, creating strengths-based communities was a way to build connection for these students throughout their college experiences and may support their success in college overall.

### ***Beyond Campus Boundaries***

Most participants took advantage of strengths-based programs and opportunities that went beyond the boundaries of the campus, whether in the surrounding community or, for Devan, on the other side of the world. Sarah shared she was able to participate in a visit to the U.S. Naval Academy through her connections to strengths-based programs. Jacqueline's most impactful strengths-based experience was the spring break service trip that she participated in for 3 years. CliftonStrengths® was integrated into the program in increasing amounts each year. A staff member with training in strengths-based development attended the trip and helped

participants reflect on and leverage their top talents throughout the experience. Jacqueline spoke about learning of the potential pitfalls of her talents when she said:

Another thing that we did was our shadow side to our strengths. And so, picking those strengths that we don't necessarily see on a day-to-day basis or vividly seeing what you're doing. She highly suggested we focus on strengths that we don't necessarily look at. And so that was really good to kind of see that as a different perspective.

Jacqueline had an opportunity to witness her talents in action away from campus and working with a team to provide service to others. She was also able to reflect in real time with a group on how her talents were used well and when she struggled. This was a powerful experience.

Jacqueline deepened her understanding about what makes her unique.

Jacqueline used her theme of Significance when she introduced the service group. She said, "Some people are more huge [in] communicating or advocating for the groups. So, I was like, hey, I'm going to utilize my significance [because] this is how I do things, [it] is what I like to do." During this trip, Jacqueline saw how her talents added value, which may have encouraged her to use them more.

During an experience that was integrated into the surrounding community, Ryen was able to see strengths play out in non-students and community leaders. In this class, 10 students were paired with 10 community leaders who all had completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment. Ryen said, "I met with local officials and it was all strengths-based. So, we had a day in class where we just talked about our strengths." She added that seeing how her strengths were applicable beyond the campus experience added to her sense of self-awareness. Ryen said, "So [at] this point I was really comfortable with my strengths, but it was cool developing my understanding and seeing it applied, especially in a community context." Like Jacqueline, stepping outside established communities allowed Ryen to see her top talents in a new light and understand new ways they could be applied.



Devan also leveraged his talents through his connections beyond the classroom. As a management major exploring international business, he decided to take study abroad trips to China. With support from faculty in his strengths-based program, he made connections with individuals who previously worked for Gallup and lived in China. He wanted to learn more about how they use CliftonStrengths® in their work. Devan spoke about this network beyond his campus when he said:

So, I think it was kind of cool to figure out . . . the connections through strengths and the wide network of it is now figuring out what kinds of opportunities do I have that can help provide [support] with strengths.

Devan spoke to the benefits of CliftonStrengths being a shared language he could use to find commonality with someone, even in another country. He used this skill on campus to build connections with other students.

While each participant's experience with strengths beyond the classroom was different, the common refrain was that building community and connections in a new environment helped them see the value of their specific top talents and how they can connect and work with others through their intentional use. Without communities both inside and outside the campus, these participants may not have had such a robust experience with strengths-based development.

### **Responding to the Research Questions**

The seven interviews provided data to answer the central guiding research question and sub-questions. In this section, I use information beyond the themes to provide clarity on participants' experiences and use of specific strengths on campus. I address each sub-question, which will ultimately answer the central guiding question: "What are the experiences of first-generation college students at 4-year public colleges with strengths-based development?"

## **Perceptions of Results from the CliftonStrengths® Assessment**

Participants' initial perceptions of their results were mixed. Some embraced all their top talents as a part of their identity; others felt some results fit them while expressing confusion or hesitation about others. Some felt one or two of their top talents did not fit them well. No one expressed that all their top talents were incorrect. In reflecting on their current perception of their talents, all participants expressed increased understanding and commitment to their Top 5 talent sequence, demonstrating development over time.

Jacqueline felt validated by her results. She said, "It kind of is really related to me. And how I am as a person was very spot on and every time I look at it, I'm like, yeah, this is me." She expanded by describing how amazing it felt when people would look at her talents and describe how they saw her using those talents and how well they fit her.

Paige felt connected to almost all her top talents. She said repeatedly that specific talents "hit" well. She said, "Developer kind of really hit towards my desire to be a teacher and helping people and understanding others around me and wanting to help build them up." Having this talent in her Top 5 reinforced her interest in helping others grow, which translated into her major and potential future career in Student Affairs.

Karl expressed surprise about his talent of Maximizer; yet, he mentioned more than once a component of Maximizer, a desire to be the best or help his team be the best. Leveraging components of a talent theme while expressing surprise that it is in one's Top 5 may indicate a lack of understanding of the specific talent. Karl had a similar comment about his initial feelings of the Command talent theme. He said, "Command, I think I have ideas about that, but I definitely never thought I would take a commander role." When describing his theme of

Ideation, Karl said, “Ideation is kinda like the way I think.” Karl initially saw his talents as a part of, but not necessarily a core component of, who he is.

When asked about his talents today, Karl said, “I feel like they’re kind of correct. I apply most of them throughout college and even sort of interviews with jobs or applying [to] certain position[s] or stuff.” Sarah stated that developing an understanding of her top talents helped her feel comfortable with herself. She said, “This is me, this is [Sarah], this is what I need, this is how I operate, and this is what I can give to someone.” Sarah developed a strong sense of self, adding “It makes me feel good that I know who I am and I’m not trying to be someone else.” Alondra agreed when she said, “I just feel really confident with them because I can tell how they work with me.” While participants’ perception of their results varied initially, it was clear that each participant developed a strong connection to their top talents and felt that they were a positive part of who they were over time and after learning more.

### **Participants’ Use of CliftonStrengths® Assessment Results in Collegiate Experience**

Each participant provided stories and examples of how they leveraged their talents across their campus experience. Devan talked about using his talents to run a team at his off-campus job. He said, “I think Maximizer helped with building relationships with people . . . learning more about people and how can I help teach them and kind of grow and develop them along the way.” Thinking about how one can help people grow to be successful in their work is a great example of the Maximizer talent. Devan also talked about his Strategic talent of helping to think about processes at work to allow for efficiencies. He shared an example of the Strategic talent saying, “Let’s do this ahead of time so that you can leave earlier.” Devan could clearly see the benefits of his talents and used them intentionally to achieve success.

Alondra talked about using her talents in her sorority. She explained:

A lot of my sorority was using my top three, actually my Top 5. It was always having to find connections, having to be finding ways to agree with each other and work with one another, while still like, okay, I value your opinion, but we have to find a way to work through all of this and not get mad at each other because we need to get this done.

In this example, she demonstrated use of her talent of Harmony, finding common ground, and Connectedness, finding the links between people (Gallup, Inc., 2021b). She specifically mentioned her talent of Individualization when talking about her campus job:

Individualization helps me a lot because sometimes the way that things are scheduled, it's as if everyone was the exact same, but sometimes we have to bring it in and then adjust things because not everyone works the same way.

Alondra gave numerous examples to show how she leveraged her top talents throughout her collegiate experience.

Sarah saw her talent of Woo show up in her campus job as a group fitness instructor. She said, "I definitely use my Woo a lot to bring the energy, to bring a lot of people, different people together." Sarah also talked about her Learner talent being purpose driven. She added:

I always have to ask my participants, hey, do you want a new exercise next week? And they're like, yes . . . So then now I have to actually make the time to sit down and learn a new exercise.

In this description, Sarah understood the nuance of how Learner shows up for her and not just generically for everyone. This led to a deeper self-awareness.

Karl talked about his theme of Command in group projects. He said, "Taking control of the situation where if some, if everyone [is] lazy, I would say, hey, I can do this because you guys won't make a deadline." He also reflected on Ideation in his gaming group by saying, "Sometimes I do have Ideation . . . I use Ideation, usually give good ideas." Even though his examples were not as robust as others, Karl could see his top talent in use in a variety of settings. Participants demonstrated the use of strengths-based development to assist their success in

college when they consciously choose to leverage top talents and could also see them in use during reflection.

### **Perceptions of Impact of Strengths-Based One-On-One Coaching During Collegiate Experience**

As I described in the subordinate theme of Supported by Coaching, some participants received informal coaching from campus administrators or formal coaching from a student or staff coach. These participants found value in their experiences and perceived it as a prized addition to their collegiate experience. When reflecting on her coaching experience, Alondra said:

I feel like that was one of the things that helped me the most, in the classroom, we would learn about the basic definitions, but because I got to work one-on-one with my coach, she was able to explain how they worked more specifically for myself, my day-to-day experiences.

She expressed classroom learning gave her the language of strengths, but her real personal learning took place in one-on-one coaching. Her coach pushed her into deeper exploration so she could appreciate and use her strengths every day.

Sarah agreed with the idea that professional coaching helped her go deeper. Sarah said, “The conversations became a lot deeper and it got to a lot of the root and core things in strengths. They helped me . . . it was a just a much deeper connection.” She provided an example of this experience by sharing how her coach helped her use the Achiever talent. Sarah learned to prioritize tasks by only writing down the most important things she wanted to accomplish in a day. She realized that she is compelled to complete a list if she writes it down, which could be overwhelming at times.

Devan was coached multiple times by different coaches across a few programs. He said the benefit of coaching was the opportunity to reflect out loud about experiences and use

prompting questions to understand how he used his talents in certain situations. When sharing about a specific experience and process he went through with a coach, Devan said the coach pointed out how his talent of Futuristic aided him. Devan ended by saying “being able to tie it together helped.”

Finally, Ryen had the unique experience of receiving informal coaching from a teaching assistant in an interpersonal communications class. She reflected on insightful conversations on her theme of Achiever and the coach suggesting she should explore the theme of Woo, a talent theme not in her Top 5. When talking about how this experience impacted her classroom engagement, Ryen said:

It was cool to see that connection between, it made the course feel a little more personal and I could see the learning outcomes in a more personal sense, especially with the class that was focused on a more social setting.

Ryen demonstrated that short experiences with one-on-one coaching on talent themes deepened her understanding and connected her to class content in an academic classroom setting. These students’ perceptions were that the opportunity to be coached formally or informally integrated CliftonStrengths® into their day-to-day activities and, by doing so, enhanced their collegiate experience.

### **Perceptions of Impact of Various Intervention Activities on Collegiate Experience**

Types of strengths-based development activities across participants varied, but, overall, each participant believed every activity in which they engaged provided value in their growth as an individual. They all felt there would have been less purpose in receiving their assessment results without programs specifically tied to exploring and applying their talents. Participants who took the assessment upon college entry all said they did not think much of their results until they participated in their first workshop or course.

Beyond the impact of experiences described in the overarching themes, participants often shared a sense of community and purpose when discussing their talents with others. In the focus group, Sarah said, “It is one of the most rewarding things that I have done in college is be a part of the strengths-based community.” She added the strengths program is “like our family.” When reflecting on his experience in a class to become a student strengths coach, Devan said:

The class was so flamboyant, and I think positive, and I think all the people that were there wanted to be there. You can tell the excitement for it, which was good [be]cause normally it’s just people aren’t expressing them[selves], or you can’t get people to talk. But this class I think it was, you couldn’t get people to be quiet.

The creation of an environment where everyone was excited to be present was a helpful outcome of many strengths-based programs across participants’ experiences.

Paige’s strengths education was tied to a training class to become an orientation leader.

She discussed the impact of that experience on her work environment. Paige said:

We really talk about all the different strengths that somebody had on the team and kind of discuss different ways that if we were in this kind of situation, who would we go to because their strengths play into this.

This learning impacted her work because she developed a better understanding of each person on her team and who could best address issues with students and families. Jacqueline and Ryan echoed this benefit when talking about their teams’ use of a team grid with top talents displayed for the group. Both expressed how they were able to accomplish work more effectively and position individuals on their team in roles and with projects that leaned into their top talents. Table 4 shows each participant’s strengths-based programs experience at the time of their interview.

### **Use of Informal Social Interactions to Aid in Strengths-Based Development**

Not all participants actively used their talents in informal social interactions. Some spoke to how their talents appeared in social situations and in interpersonal relationships, but not as

**Table 4***Participants' Strengths-Based Experiences*

Type of experience	Alondra	Devan	Jacqueline	Karl	Paige	Ryen	Sarah
Becoming a Coach	X	X					X
Classroom Integration						X	
Community Engagement			X				
Formal Coaching	X	X					X
Informal Coaching			X		X	X	
Retreat/Trip			X	X			
Strengths-Based Class	X	X			X		X
Integrated at Campus Job	X	X			X	X	X
Integrated in Student Organizations			X			X	X
Teaching a Strengths-Based Class		X		X			X
Travel Abroad		X					
Workshop			X			X	

directly as when discussing clubs, jobs, and classes. Sarah spoke about her talent of Woo. She said, “It’s definitely my Woo that drives all social things.” She said this talent benefited her because she created a large social network where she knew people everywhere. She also combined the talent of Woo with Individualization when she said, “When you meet new people, it’s that Woo likes to meet them, and individualization likes to learn the uniqueness within them.” In her view, actively using these talents helped to build connections across the campus community and provided a sense of belonging.

Several participants spoke about using their talents to establish friendships. Alondra said the following about her theme of Connectedness:



Just being able to connect my experiences, like connectedness, my experiences, my past, and then everything I heard that's going on with them . . . I feel like I have a lot of trusting friendship if they know that they can always come talk to me.

Paige added, "It's made me see the way that I connect with others and how I go about it whenever I want to make new friendships." She added, "It helped kind of bridge a connection between people like, oh you have this strength there, you have this personality trait, I do too." Each of these examples demonstrates how an individual can use their strengths to understand how to create social connections with others by better understanding themselves and finding commonalities with others.

Rylen reflected on how knowing her talents helped her become more self-aware and advocate for herself. She discussed how knowing other's top talents helped her relationships when she said, "Understanding other people's helps me have a little bit more understanding and grace when someone's maybe don't align perfectly with me." Jacqueline used the self-awareness gathered from her strengths-based development in a different way. She said, "It kind of flushed out a lot of my friends, staying to my true identify, for sure. And just my strengths alone because like I said, it's very overpowering and so some people can't take that." She felt her themes of Competition, Achiever, and Focus narrowed her social group to those who could support her ambition and those she could support in turn.

### **Perceptions of Strengths-Based Development Helping to Accomplish Goals or Succeed in College**

Each participant expressed that knowledge or use of their talents helped them accomplish various goals in college. Karl said, "I would definitely say getting my first internship [was] because of a lot of my strengths." He used the knowledge of his specific Top 5 talents to explain how he could contribute to the company during his interview. He said, "I [was] definitely able to

get an internship because [of] my five strengths because I can demonstrate them too.” Karl saw his talents’ tangible impact by his enhanced ability to talk positively about himself.

Ryen said, “I think my strengths have just encouraged me to slow down [and] be intentional about the way that I achieve my goals.” She elaborated:

I could burn myself out on the way to a goal, but my strengths [have] reminded me, okay, this is what you’re good at. And we can take this lens and make this thing happen, but it might be a little bit slower, and the path might look a little bit different than other people.

Her experience across her strengths-based development programs was one of self-awareness and self-care. Ryen developed an appreciation for her talents of Input and Intellection. She better understood her need to take things slow and process through information to make the best decision for herself and others.

Sarah talked about her Achiever talent when she said:

Learning that I’m such a purpose-driven person and that I need to know all the facts before I jump into something and knowing that I need a task list and knowing that I’m doing the work for it really drives me. And I don’t have to apologize for that.

She became aware of both what drives her goals and how she can best accomplish them. Along with other participants, Sarah realized her talents are a benefit to her and not to be hidden or limited in her work. Devan talked about his talents of Futuristic and Achiever when he said, “Once I put it down on paper, it’s kind of like, okay, I want to do this, I’m going to get it done and then I’m going to check it off and be happy.” He used those talents to plan for what he wanted to accomplish and then complete his goal.

Paige said she used her talents to decide what teaching meant to her. Alondra claimed leaning into her talents allowed her to accomplish her goal of growing her social network and engaging in experiences. Jacqueline expressed an overall sentiment that knowing her strengths encouraged her to work even harder toward her goals. Jacqueline said:

It just, it does make me really work harder. [Be]cause I was already working hard but it made me want to go 10 times more because I know I was capable to, you know, be an Achiever, be [able to] focus on my goals and making sure that I'm doing what I gotta do. I know I was capable of doing that because of my strengths, you know, it said, you can do it. So, it kinda just helped me push a little bit harder.

Jacqueline added that the push from her strengths was even more important to her as a first-generation college student. Her family did not understand the intensity of her experience and could not help push her forward like the families of non-first-generation students. Knowing her top talents and feeling validated through them helped Jacqueline and other participants achieve the goals they set out for themselves throughout their collegiate experience.

### **Synthesis of the Phenomenon**

Each participant was a first-generation college student who embarked on a strengths-based development journey unique to them, but each experienced a similar phenomenon. These first-generation college students experienced personal self-discovery and validation of what makes them unique through strengths-based development. Their journeys were expanded and confirmed by individuals and communities on their own personal strengths-based journeys. These experiences and relationships ultimately led the participants to an active and conscious application of talent in all aspects of their collegiate life. Intersection with others involved in strengths-based development, whether students, staff, faculty, or community members, was a critical component in the phenomenon. Without such experiences, the phenomenon would be unlikely to occur.

### **Conclusion**

In Chapter 4, I introduced participants to center their voices in the data and provide context to their unique and varied experiences. I then provided a detailed description of the five superordinate and 10 subordinate themes gleaned from an in-depth analysis of the data from

seven interviews. I discussed additional information pertaining directly to the sub-research questions and then described a synthesis of the overall phenomenon. In the next chapter, I discuss the findings, implications for practice, and implication for future research.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

My purpose for this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore perceptions of first-generation college students who had experiences with strengths-based development. I examined strengths-based development experiences using the CliftonStrengths® assessment offered by the Gallup Organization. My central guiding research question was “What are the experiences of first-generation college students at 4-year public colleges with strengths-based development?” Through my interviews with seven first-generation college students from three study sites, I identified five superordinate themes and 10 subordinate themes, which provided answers to my central question. In this chapter, I discuss these findings and connect them to previous research.

The first-generation college students in this study all had a positive experience engaging with their CliftonStrengths® results. Upon receiving results of their assessment, each student had a different reaction depending on how the results resonated with their perception of themselves. Reactions ranged from confusion regarding one or more of their top talent themes to a sense of validation and excitement about their Top 5 talent list. Participants developed an increased understanding of their talents and those of others after engaging in one or more strengths-based activity. This aligns with Pritchard’s (2008) finding that a strength-based intervention is necessary for a student to begin a strengths journey. Participants who expressed initial skepticism about one or more themes provided examples of those same themes in interviews and attributed this ability to their strengths-based experiences.

Louis (2011) and Mostek (2010) both addressed the idea that a student learning about their top talents, but not learning to leverage them, could be a potential detriment to their success

in college. My results are inconsistent with this idea. The themes of this study demonstrated participants who did not engage with their results for some time merely forgot about them until they participated in a strengths-based activity. Their initial reactions did not appear to matter in this regard. Karl expressed doubts about multiple themes. Jacqueline and Ryen expressed a strong connection to their results. Each said they put their results aside until they had a reason to engage with them further. Jacqueline went further and explained that, even though all incoming students were required to complete the assessment, most of her social network (outside of her strengths community) expressed confusion or indifference if she attempted to discuss her CliftonStrengths® results. According to my research, it appears that participants experienced little positive or negative impact after receiving assessment results without additional learning.

Participants also engaged in and created a community that helped them grow in the application of their top talents through strengths-based programs. This community provided support throughout their college experience. Devan spoke about choosing to surround himself with people who shared similar strengths. Sarah called her strengths community a family. Community members were students, staff, and faculty who understood the CliftonStrengths® assessment. Members could point out instances where participants used their talents effectively or where they could have used them in a more successful way.

Social support allowed Devan and Sarah to use their talents more both inside and outside their strengths-community. This finding aligns with Bowers and Lopez's (2010) theory of capitalization on strengths. In their study, Bowers and Lopez (2010) stated social support is the starting point of the iterative process of strengths capitalization. My results suggest that the participants' social network around the CliftonStrengths® journey served as the critical support for all other strengths experiences. My results also align with Soria and Stubblefield (2015b),

who found students who discussed their strengths were able to develop deeper friendships and felt a sense of belonging.

In this study, it was clear that the more participants invested time into understanding and using their top talents, the more they could demonstrate how those talents helped them be successful in multiple areas of their lives. These results replicate observations from Mostek (2010) in her research with undergraduate business students. My results also align with the fundamental idea behind a strengths-based development program; energy must be invested into talents over time to make them stronger (Rath, 2007). In my conversations with participants, those who spent multiple years investing in the development of their strengths could share detailed examples of how they used their top talents. During conversations with participants who had not invested as much time, I used my personal understanding of the CliftonStrengths® assessment to connect their examples and language to specific talents. For example, Karl referred multiple times to “being the best,” and he was demonstrating the talent of Maximizer, while Alondra specifically mentioned her theme of Harmony when talking about finding common ground.

Almost all participants received individual coaching on their CliftonStrengths® results. Evidence suggests this may have been the most important part of their strengths-based development journey. While it was valuable to hear how they demonstrated their talents or how much their top talents “fit” from peers, the opportunity to discuss their results with a trained coach provided a unique opportunity for growth.

A finding from the data that surprised me was the level of the coach was less important than the fact that the coach was trained. Two participants received coaching from both professionally certified coaches and trained student coaches. Neither said that their coaching

experience was markedly different between the two types. Based on Prichard's (2008) claim that a highly trained faculty member was of the utmost importance, I expected that their experience with a professional coach would be more impactful. Perhaps quality training mitigated the gap in experience between student and professional coaches for the two students in my study. It is also possible an additional benefit of learning from a student coach may be the growth of social support discussed by Bowers and Lopez (2010) in their theory of strengths capitalization. If researched further, this finding could have implications for scalability of strengths-based coaching programs on college campuses.

Most participants shared they developed a better understanding of the talents in the CliftonStrengths® assessment outside of their specific top talents by participating in strengths-based activities. Sarah, Ryen, and Devan shared that they learned from other students who had different talent themes than them by participating in workshops and classes. Jacqueline, Ryen, and Paige also spoke about the benefit of understanding the different talents of those on their teams, so they could best align individuals to specific problems or tasks. Without knowledge of the benefits of each of the 34 talent themes, it would be difficult for these students to integrate their own self-awareness into a larger team. The students shared that they gained this knowledge through classes and workshops dedicated to a more holistic understanding of the CliftonStrengths assessment.

Data suggest that growth of self-awareness through strengths-based development activities helped these students along their major choice and career path. None of the participants changed majors or career paths specifically because of their assessment results. However, most used their results to reflect on what they enjoyed doing and if that aligned with their current path. For example, Devan reflected on how his top talents would help him as a management major.



Alondra's results helped her confirm that she enjoyed developing people and that she could develop others more by focusing in child, youth, and family studies. While there is no research correlating student majors to specific CliftonStrengths® talent themes, understanding their strengths helped these students determine their best path. These data align with results from Stebelton et al. (2012), where integrating strengths-based development in a 1st-year seminar showed an effect on major and career choice. It is possible that reflecting on their strengths provided some clarity to students in those important life decisions.

By engaging in strengths-based development, participants became more confident in who they were and what they could accomplish. Most participants expressed they could see how their top talents could help them succeed in their jobs, student organizations, and in classes. Developing self-confidence is important for all students but could be critical in supporting first-generation college students.

Development of self-confidence could add to Yosso's (2005) community cultural wealth component of aspirational capital. Yosso (2005) defined aspirational capital as "the ability to maintain hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77). Most participants experienced challenges or barriers while attending college but could lean on the confidence they developed through their strengths-based activities to persevere. Jacqueline mentioned her family could not provide all the support she needed, and she sometimes did not feel welcomed at her campus. Despite these experiences, she believed her top talents of Achiever and Focus helped her aspire to graduation and her future career.

Participation in strengths-based development activities also provided these students the opportunity to build social capital through the network of strength-based educators on campus. Bourdieu (1986) stated this form of capital is passed down across generations in families, so a

first-generation college student would not have access to that knowledge on a college campus. Yosso (2005) broadened this idea to account for the larger community and social connections an individual can access. One unique aspect of a strengths-based program on a college campus is that campus administrators learn about individual talents of students and can see potential opportunities for growth and development. Every student in my study provided at least one example where a campus administrator recommended that they apply for a role or join a specific group, in part, because of their knowledge of the students' talents. It is possible that participating in strengths-based programs could connect first-generation college students to a new network of support.

Participants shared that the opportunity to engage in strengths-based activities in the community exposed them to the idea that their CliftonStrengths® could be useful beyond the college environment. Some participants connected with individuals outside of their campus who completed the assessment or spoke with professionals who used CliftonStrengths in their area of employment. Through these experiences, participants began to think about how they might use their top talents as a professional and how the CliftonStrengths community expanded beyond their specific campus. This too provided a new network of support as illustrated by Devan's ability to engage with members of the CliftonStrengths community on his study abroad trip to China.

Finally, most participants believed that involvement in strengths-based programs had a substantial impact on their collegiate experience. Through their participation in these programs, participants learned about the assets they possess, found the self-confidence to apply for leadership roles, developed strong networks of support, and learned to advocate more for themselves. Pascarella et al. (2004) stated that involvement in extracurricular activities and

interactions with peers are important for first-generation college student success. My study supports the idea that participation in a well-designed strengths-based program could accomplish both of those things at the same time for first-generation college students.

This study contributed to the existing research by providing a rich description of the phenomenon of strengths-based development as experienced by first-generation college students across multiple study sites. It also provided information on the many ways CliftonStrengths® assessment and strengths-based programs have been used on college campuses. It showed benefits to students participating in programs that help them identify and apply their strengths in their lives. I also connected this research to other studies showing where there was alignment and support, or areas where further exploration may be needed. For higher education professionals working with first-generation students, this research provides initial support to the potential benefits of a strengths-based program.

### **Implications for Practice**

This study provides information for higher education administrators to consider in the design of a strengths-based program for first-generation college students. All seven first-generation students in this study stated that they found value in their strengths journey as a component of their experience as a student. I encourage higher education administrators to explore the potential of providing first-generation college students with strengths-based experiences.

I have five recommendations from the results of this study. First, all seven participants in this study expressed their involvement in a strengths-based development program was an important part of their collegiate experience. They shared numerous examples as to how their strengths-based knowledge and experiences contributed to positive growth and goal

achievement. Each also believed other first-generation students should be given the opportunity to discover their CliftonStrengths® and engage in strengths-based programs. Though a small sample, the breakdown of participant characteristics is close to the overall demographics of the general population of first-generation college students (Saenz et al., 2007; Skomsvold, 2014). Therefore, I recommend higher education practitioners explore implementing or expanding the use of the CliftonStrengths assessment with first-generation college students on their campuses.

Second, higher education administrators who already use the CliftonStrengths® assessment or are considering beginning use may want to examine how a first-generation college student begins their strengths-based development journey. The three participants who completed the assessment with no immediate follow-up waited at least a semester to reflect on their results. I recommend higher education administrators consider how to support first-generation college students in reflecting on their results soon after completing the assessment.

Third, it was clear from the data and the study themes that ongoing engagement with strengths-based programs was critical in participants' growth in understanding and use of their CliftonStrengths® results. Participants who continually engaged in workshops, coaching, classes, or retreats with a focus on strengths over multiple years had the most in depth understanding of their personal talents and those not in their Top 5. These participants could clearly see how their talents may help them in their careers post-graduation. I would recommend higher education practitioners explore the potential of designing a robust multi-year strengths-based development program to support first-generation college students' growth over time.

Fourth, participants expressed that access to strengths-based coaching was an important part of their experience. Of my participants, six were coached by professional staff and three were also coached by other students. Participants found value in both experiences. Training

students to be strengths coaches might create an opportunity to provide coaching to more students. Higher education administrators could explore training specific student leadership roles, such as orientation leaders, mentors, or even academic tutors, to provide strengths-based coaching.

Fifth, participants who shared examples of how they used their top talents at work, in student organizations, or in the community provided a rich and descriptive understanding of their talents in action. Additionally, all participants shared that learning about their CliftonStrengths® results helped them reflect on their major and career choices. I recommend exploring if additional campus professionals in areas such as student activities, academic advising, and career advising could be trained in discussing the CliftonStrengths assessment with first-generation college students. This might provide opportunities for students to learn how to leverage their talents beyond classes and workshops.

### **Implications for Future Research**

There are several implications for future research from the results of this study. While I explored the phenomenon of a strengths-based experience for first-generation college students, I did not examine the efficacy of individual strengths-based activities. Participants engaged in more than 12 unique strengths-based development experiences. Future research could examine specific programs and experiences to determine which are most beneficial to students and should be integrated into strengths-based programs on a college campus.

In my study, some participants received their assessment results as an incoming 1st-year student, but did not engage with their results right away. These students eventually participated in strengths-based programs and benefitted from those experiences. Future research could explore the potential impact on students who received their results but were not provided the

support needed to understand and apply those results. This type of research might help determine if providing access to the assessment without support is a potential detriment to the student experience.

One theme from this research was Helped Me Along My Path and described how participants reflected on their CliftonStrengths® results in relation to their major and career. Future researchers could examine how students might use their assessment results in these and other life choices. This research might show new ways that the CliftonStrengths assessment could be integrated into the student college experience.

Future researchers could study many different populations of college students. Though the demographics of my participants were relatively diverse, I did not have enough data to examine additional intersections of identity such as race, ethnicity, or gender. Future researchers of strengths-based development could specifically examine diverse populations of students. Such research could provide additional information on how to build effective strengths-based programs on campuses for all students.

In addition to examining diverse populations of students, researchers could also examine the implications of cultural, ethnic, religious, and gender norms on CliftonStrengths® results and a student's resonance with those results. It is possible the expression of certain talents may be reinforced or discouraged in developmental years due to the background characteristics of the particular student. This may result in a Top 5 talent sequence that is socially constructed and not particularly resonant with the student. It is also possible certain talent themes are easily reinforced for those with privileged identities but more difficult to develop for those experiencing the barriers of discrimination and systemic oppression (Tapia-Fuselier & Irwin,

2019). Though discussed by Tapia-Fuselier and Irwin (2019) in a critical whiteness analysis, this idea could be additionally examined through participant-focused research.

The CliftonStrengths® assessment is used in a variety of offices and different functional areas of the higher education profession. While almost all strengths-based research on college campuses is focused on the student experience, CliftonStrengths could be used by professionals on campus to accomplish their work with students and colleagues. Participants expressed that the administrators they interacted with had a passion for strengths-based development. Future researchers could examine strengths-based development from the perspective of the higher education professional to provide information on the potential benefits in the broader campus community.

Finally, future research could expand on this study by exploring the potential connection between first-generation student retention and engagement in strengths-based programs. Two studies make this research beneficial. First, Ishitani (2006) showed first-generation college students were more likely to leave their university than their non-first-generation peers. Second, Soria and Stubblefield (2015a) determined through a large quantitative study that 1st-year students were retained at a higher rate to their second year if they completed the CliftonStrengths® assessment. Researchers could examine if first-generation college students who complete the CliftonStrengths assessment are retained at a higher rate than first-generation college students who do not. They could also explore possible reasons why participation in strengths-based development programs may help retain first-generation college students. Results from such a study might provide a rationale as for why campus administrators may want to explore the development of strengths-based programs for first-generation college students.

## Conclusion

I conducted this study to better understand the experiences of first-generation college students with strengths-based development. In my career as a higher education administrator, I developed multiple strengths-based programs at a student leadership center. Throughout that experience, I witnessed the potential positive impact of CliftonStrengths® programs on a majority first-generation student population. This study was intended to examine that same population of students at other campuses to provide a rich description of the phenomenon. Key themes emerged from the data, which describe this phenomenon. They were (a) It's Just Natural for Me, (b) With Whom I Spend My Time, (c) Leveraging My Strengths, (d) Helped Me Along My Path, and (e) Finding Community Through Strengths.

These five themes and additional supporting data helped to synthesize a statement of the phenomenon that the students experienced. The phenomenon of these first-generation college students with strengths-based development was one of personal self-discovery and validation of what makes them unique. These participants' journeys were expanded and confirmed by the community of others who were on their own personal strengths-based journey. Strengths-based experiences and relationships built along the way ultimately led participants toward an active and conscious application of talent in all aspects of their collegiate life.

My discussion of the results demonstrates connections between this study and additional research in the fields of strengths-based development and first-generation college students. The results provide implications for practitioners to consider when building campus-wide strengths-based programs or programs targeted to specific populations of students. I also hope my research will serve as a basis for additional research exploring the phenomenon of strengths-based development. Overall, this study demonstrated that strengths-based development experiences of



these seven first-generation college students were positive and provided each a deep understanding of what makes them unique.

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## APPENDICES



## Appendix A—Approval Letter



eProtocol  
Office of the Vice President for Research  
321 General Services Building - Campus Delivery 2011 eprotocol  
TEL: (970) 491-1553

**DATE:** March 27, 2020  
**TO:** Kuk, Linda, School of Education  
Faircloth, Susan, Lerer, Steve, School of Education  
**FROM:** Felton-Noyle, Tammy, Senior IRB Coordinator, BMR, CSU IRB Exempt  
**PROTOCOL TITLE:** Exploring the Perceptions of First-Generation College Students with Strengths Based Development  
**PROTOCOL NUMBER:** 20-9815H  
**APPROVAL or DETERMINATION PERIOD:** March 27, 2020

### NOTICE OF IRB REVIEW FOR HUMAN RESEARCH

Thank you for submitting your application for exempt review. We appreciate the work you have done on your proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above-entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations 45 CFR 46.101 that govern the protections of human subjects, specifically .

Exempt studies are subject to the ethical principles articulated in The Belmont Report, found at the OHRP Website [www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html](http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/humansubjects/guidance/belmont.html).

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit an amendment to the IRB. Exempt determinations are active for five (5) years. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may change this determination for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and may require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite the best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete written explanation of the event and your written response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event.

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all communication or correspondence related to your application and this approval. Should you have additional questions or require clarification of the contents of this letter, please contact the IRB Office. On behalf of the IRB, we wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.

Please direct any questions about the IRB's actions on this project to:

IRB Office - (970) 491-1553; [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.Colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.Colostate.edu)

Claire Chance, Senior IRB Coordinator - (970) 491-1381; [Claire.Chance@Colostate.edu](mailto:Claire.Chance@Colostate.edu)

Tammy Felton-Noyle, Senior IRB Coordinator - (970) 491-1655; [Tammy.Felton-Noyle@Colostate.edu](mailto:Tammy.Felton-Noyle@Colostate.edu)

Felton-Noyle, Tammy

Initial exempt determination has been granted March 27, 2020 to recruit with the approved recruitment and consent procedures. The above-referenced research activity has been reviewed and determined to meet exempt review by the Institutional Review Board under exempt category 2(ii) of the 2018 Requirements. Approved documents include: Interviews Questions; Agreement - [REDACTED] University; Dissertation Proposal Methods - Lerer; Proposal Reference List; Demographic Survey Consent Form; Email Invitation to Participate in Research Study.

Please note that CSU is currently under restrictions including social distancing related to research <a href="" target="\_blank"><https://safety.colostate.edu/coronavirus/></a>

It is acknowledged that your recruitment and procedures are flexible enough to allow for remote recruitment and participation.

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## Appendix B—Demographic Survey

### Demographic Survey

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

#### Top Five CliftonStrengths®

1. \_\_\_\_\_

4. \_\_\_\_\_

2. \_\_\_\_\_

5. \_\_\_\_\_

3. \_\_\_\_\_

#### Academic Status

Junior

Senior

#### Are you considered a low-income student?

Yes

No

#### To which gender identity do you most identify?

Female

Male

Transgender Female

Transgender Male

Gender Variant/Non-Conforming

Not Listed: \_\_\_\_\_

Prefer not to answer

#### Ethnicity

White

Hispanic or Latino

Black or African American

Native American or American Indian

Asian/Pacific Islander

Multiracial: \_\_\_\_\_

Not Listed: \_\_\_\_\_

Prefer not to answer

## Appendix C—Gatekeeper Invitation Email

Campus Invitation to Become a Study Site for Doctoral Research from Colorado State University

Dear [Insert Name]

My name is Steve Lerer. I am a graduate student at Colorado State University working with my faculty advisor, Dr. Linda Kuk in the School of Education. I am beginning my dissertation research and am looking for study sites from which I can draw student participants. Below is a short summary of my study:

### **Exploring the Perceptions of First-Generation College Students with Strengths Based Development**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the perceptions of first-generation college students with the experiences of strengths-based development. The forms of strengths-based development experiences examined will be those initiated by the use of the CliftonStrengths® assessment offered by the Gallup Organization. This study is multi-institutional, interviewing 4-6 students at three research sites which use strengths-based development. The interviews will involve questions about participants' history and campus experience, their experience with strengths-based development opportunities and understanding of their results, ways they have used their strengths-based knowledge during their collegiate experience, and their perception of the impact of strengths-based development on their collegiate experience. It is hoped that the research will provide other researchers and campus administrators with descriptive information about the experiences of some first-generation college students participating in strengths-based development which could inform future research and campus programs.

I am looking for three research sites that meet the following criteria, which I believe your campus meets:

1. 4-year public college or university
2. Administers the CliftonStrengths® assessment to students
3. Hosts at least one strengths-based development program on campus (Coaching with a Certified Gallup Coach, 1:1 meetings, group meetings, programs and activities, first-year seminars, classes, etc.)

Once confirmed, I would plan to work with a campus administrator to recruit 4-6 students who meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as a First-Generation College Student (Defined in this study as a student with neither parent having attended college)
2. Age 19-23
3. Junior or Senior status (60+ college credits)

4. Completed the CliftonStrengths® (Strengthsfinder) assessment offered by the Gallup organization.
5. Participated in at least one strengths-based development activity on their campus.

If this study is one in which you think your campus would like to participate, please let me know and I would love to schedule a phone call to discuss the study further.

Thank you!  
Steve

## Appendix D—Email Invitation to Participate in Research Study

### Exploring the Perceptions of First-Generation College Students with Strengths-Based Development

Dear Potential Research Participant,

My name is Steve Lerer. I am a graduate student at Colorado State University working with my faculty advisor, Dr. Linda Kuk in the School of Education. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study, which looks at the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college students participating in strengths-based development on their campus through their results from the Gallup CliftonStrengths® (Strengthsfinder) assessment.

I am interested in conducting interviews with 4-6 students at your campus who meet the following criteria:

1. Identify as a First-Generation College Student (Defined in this study as a student with neither parent having attended college)
2. Age 19-23
3. Junior or Senior status (60+ college credits)
4. Completed the CliftonStrengths® (Strengthsfinder) assessment offered by the Gallup organization.
5. Participated in at least one strengths-based development activity on their campus.

It is hoped that the research will provide other researchers and campus administrators with descriptive information about the experiences of some first-generation college students participating in strengths-based development which could inform future research and campus programs.

If you meet the criteria listed above and agree to participate in this research study, I will conduct a 60-90 minute video interview at the time of your choice. The interview will involve questions about your history and campus experience, your experience with strengths-based development opportunities and understanding of your results, ways you have used your strengths-based knowledge during your collegiate experience, and your perception of the impact of strengths-based development on your collegiate experience.

Additionally, this research will involve students at multiple research sites, so after the interviews are completed and analyzed, you will be invited to participate in one 60-90 minute focus group with other study participants. In the focus group I will share the initial themes generated by the research and ask for feedback and additional experiences that may illuminate or contradict the themes.

If you wish to participate in this research, please contact me at [redacted] or [redacted]. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact the CSU IRB at: [RICRO\\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu](mailto:RICRO_IRB@mail.colostate.edu); 970-491-1553.

Thank You!

Steve Lerer

Doctoral Candidate, Colorado State University

## Appendix E—IRB Informed Consent Letter

### Colorado State University Consent to Participate in Research

#### *Exploring the Perceptions of First-Generation College Students with Strengths-Based Development*

##### **Introduction and Purpose**

My name is Steve Lerer. I am a graduate student at Colorado State University working with my faculty advisor, Dr. Linda Kuk in the School of Education. I would like to invite you to take part in my research study, which looks at the experiences and perceptions of first-generation college students participating in strengths-based development on their campus through their results from the Gallup CliftonStrengths® assessment.

##### **Procedures**

If you agree to participate in my research, I will conduct an interview with you at a time of your choice. The interview will take place virtually over a video conference using the Zoom interface. The interview will involve questions about your history and campus experience, your experience with strengths-based development opportunities and understanding of your results, ways you have used your strengths based knowledge during your collegiate, and your perception of the impact of strengths based development on your collegiate experience. You will also be asked to complete a short demographic survey. These demographic data will be discussed if patterns emerge in the data analysis process.

The interview should last about 60-90 minutes. With your permission, I will audiotape and take notes during the interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, I will take notes instead. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable or change your mind for any reason during the interview, I can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don't wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time.

After all interviews are conducted and the data are reviewed, I will invite you to participate in one focus group with other participants again over the Zoom interviews. The focus group will take place within two months of the final individual interview and will last about 60-90 minutes. In the focus group I will share the initial themes generated by the research and ask for feedback and additional experiences that may illuminate or contradict the themes. With your permission, I will audiotape and take notes during this focus group as well.



**Benefits**

There is no direct benefit to you from taking part in this study. It is hoped that the research will provide other researchers and campus administrators with descriptive information about the experiences of some first-generation college students participating in strengths-based development which could inform future research and campus programs.

**Risks/Discomforts**

The questions in this research are not sensitive in nature but you are free to decline to answer any questions or to stop the interview at any time.

As with all research, there is a chance that confidentiality could be compromised; however, we are taking precautions to minimize this risk.

**Confidentiality**

Your study data will be handled as confidentially as possible. If results of this study are published or presented, individual names and other personally identifiable information will not be used.

To minimize the risks to confidentiality, I will store the recordings in an encrypted file on my laptop. University names will not be discussed in the research and will only be described by size, type, and area of the country. Audio recordings will be destroyed immediately after the completion of the study.

When the research is completed, I will save the transcriptions and other study data indefinitely for possible use in future research done by myself. The same measures described above will be taken to protect confidentiality of this study data. We may be asked to share the research files with the CSU Institutional Review Board ethics committee for auditing purposes.

**Compensation**

You will not be paid for taking part in this study.

**Rights**

***Participation in research is completely voluntary.*** You are free to decline to take part in the project. You can decline to answer any questions and are free to stop taking part in the project at any time. Whether or not you choose to participate in the research and whether or not you choose to answer any questions or continue participating in the project, there will be no penalty to you or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**Questions**

If you have any questions about this research, please feel free to contact me at [redacted] or [redacted].

If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a research participant in this study, please contact the Colorado State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) at: 970-491-1381, or e-mail RICRO\_IRB@mail.colostate.edu .

\*\*\*\*\*

CONSENT

Do you consent for your interview to be audiotaped?

Yes

No

If you wish to participate in this study, please sign and date below. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep for your own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Name (*please print*)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## Appendix F—Interview Questions for Research Study

Title: Exploring the Perceptions of First-Generation College Students with Strengths-Based Development

### Guiding Research Questions:

- GQ1 What are the perceptions of first-generation college students of their results from the CliftonStrengths® assessment?
- GQ2 How do first-generation college students use their CliftonStrengths® assessment results in their collegiate experience?
- GQ3 What perceptions do first-generation college students have of the impact of strengths based one-on-one coaching on their collegiate experience?
- GQ4 How do first-generation college students perceive the impact of various intervention activities (e.g. classroom-based experiences, first-year seminars, workshops, and group activities) using CliftonStrengths® results on their collegiate experience?
- GQ5 How do first-generation college students use informal social interactions to aid in their strengths-based development?
- GQ6 How do first-generation college students perceive participation in strengths-based development helping them accomplish goals or succeeding in college?

### Interview Questions:

#### Part 1: Intro: Student History and Campus Experience

1. Please tell me a little bit about yourself. (Introductory question)
2. What does it mean to you to be a first-generation college student? (Introductory question)
3. As you began your college career, where did you think you would struggle and what did you think were your strengths? (Introductory question)
4. Please tell me about the experiences so far in college that had the most positive impact on you as a FGCS. (GQ 5-6)
5. Please tell me about the experiences so far in college that had the most adverse impact on you as a FGCS. (GQ 5-6)

#### Part 2: Student Experience with Strengths Based Development

6. How were you first introduced to the CliftonStrengths® assessment? (GQ 1)
7. Describe for me your reaction to your assessment results. What jumped off the page? Did anything surprise you? (GQ 1)

8. Describe for me the feelings you had when reading over the descriptions of your Top 5 CliftonStrengths®? (GQ 1)
9. How did learning about your top talents change the way you viewed yourself? (GQ 1)
10. Describe for me how do you feel about your Top 5 talent themes today? (GQ1)
11. Please walk me through your strengths-based development experiences. Describe each in depth, what you learned, and the impact, if any, it has had on you and your collegiate experience. (GQ 4-6):
  - a. 1:1 Discussions
  - b. Group Discussions
  - c. Programs and Activities
  - d. Classes
12. If you participated in CliftonStrengths® coaching with a Gallup coach, describe for me that experience, what conversations did you have, how did that help you understand and use your assessment results? (GQ 3)

### Part 3: Student Use of Strengths in Campus Life

13. Please describe for me specific instances on how you have used what you learned from your CliftonStrengths® results and strengths-based development activities in (GQ 2, 5-6):
  - a. Campus jobs or internships
  - b. Classes
  - c. Student organizations
  - d. Social settings
14. Please describe any other areas where you have used what you learned from your CliftonStrengths® results and strengths-based development activities? (GQ 2, 5-6)
15. In the settings we discussed, what hesitations or challenges have come up for you in using what you've learned through your CliftonStrengths® results? (GQ 1, 2, 5-6)

### Part 4: Impact of Strengths Based Development on Goals and Overall Collegiate Experience

16. What have you learned about yourself since beginning to participate in strengths-based development experiences? (GQ 1, 6)
17. Describe for me how your experiences with strengths- based development helped you accomplish your goals in college? (GQ 1, 6)
18. Describe for me how your experiences with strengths-based development impacted your decision making? (GQ 6)
19. Describe for me how your experiences with strengths-based development impacted your friendships? (GQ 5, 6)
20. Describe for me how your experiences with strengths-based development impacted your sense of self-confidence? (GQ 6)

21. Describe for me how your experiences with strengths-based development influenced your overall collegiate experience as a FGCS? (GQ 6)
22. As a FGCS, how do you think participating in strengths-based development helped you overcome barriers to your success? (GQ 6)
23. In what ways do you plan to use your strengths-based learning in the future? (GQ 2, 6)
24. Do you have anything you would like to add or elaborate on from this interview?  
(Closing question)

## Appendix G—Focus Group Questions

Theme: Strengths—It’s Just Natural for Me

1. When reflecting on this theme, what does it mean to you?
2. What examples do you have that further illuminate or counter this theme?
3. How did this theme impact you specifically as a first-generation college student?

Theme: Strengths Helped Me Choose Who to Spend My Time With

1. When reflecting on this theme, what does it mean to you?
2. What examples do you have that further illuminate or counter this theme?
3. How did this theme impact you specifically as a first-generation college student?

Theme: Advocate for Opportunities to Leverage My Strengths

1. When reflecting on this theme, what does it mean to you?
2. What examples do you have that further illuminate or counter this theme?
3. How did this theme impact you specifically as a first-generation college student?

Theme: Strengths Put Me on My Path

1. When reflecting on this theme, what does it mean to you?
2. What examples do you have that further illuminate or counter this theme?
3. How did this theme impact you specifically as a first-generation college student?

Theme: Strengths Provides Unique Opportunities

1. When reflecting on this theme, what does it mean to you?
2. What examples do you have that further illuminate or counter this theme?
3. How did this theme impact you specifically as a first-generation college student?

Theme: Being Coached and Coaching Others Is Special

1. When reflecting on this theme, what does it mean to you?
2. What examples do you have that further illuminate or counter this theme?
3. How did this theme impact you specifically as a first-generation college student?

Theme: Engagement with Strengths—Communities Matters

1. When reflecting on this theme, what does it mean to you?
2. What examples do you have that further illuminate or counter this theme?
3. How did this theme impact you specifically as a first-generation college student?

Theme: College Would Have Been Different If Not for Strengths

1. When reflecting on this theme, what does it mean to you?
2. What examples do you have that further illuminate or counter this theme?
3. How did this theme impact you specifically as a first-generation college student?

Overall questions:

1. Some of the interviews touched on an initial concern of being welcomed or fitting in on campus. How did your experiences with CliftonStrengths® address that concern?
2. Do you have anything else to add?