

April 05, 2018

Using a Strengths-Based Approach to Retain College Students

by Tom Matson and Jennifer Robison

Thriving, engaged colleges and universities have an advantage others don't -- they retain more students. And retention is a serious issue: Only slightly over half of U.S. college students graduate within six years, and nearly one in eight who start in any fall term will transfer by the following fall.

From a student's perspective, dropping out of college can be a ruinous loss of investment and job potential. From a university administration's view, student attrition is financially hazardous in a time of shrinking budgets. For the institution as a whole, every lost student represents lost alumni funding and a mission opportunity for mission fulfillment.

It's for these reasons that retention has become a pressing concern for college administrators.

To tackle this problem, many university administrators are using [CliftonStrengths for Students](#) (formerly StrengthsQuest) on their campus, hoping to create thriving, engaged students. In fact, more than 600 colleges and universities worldwide use CliftonStrengths for Students to transform the way their students experience college and help them thrive on campus and beyond. That's over half a million students every year.

As reported in the article "Building a Strengths-Based Campus to Support Student Retention" in the *Journal of College Student Development*, a large, public research-intensive university found:

"First-year students who took the [CliftonStrengths] assessment had significantly higher retention rates compared to their peers who did not take the assessment: 91.5% ($n = 4,653$) of first-year students who took the [assessment] were retained compared to 80.8% ($n = 227$) of students who did not take the [assessment]."

Those retention rates are the result of a leadership strategy. No school can simply administer an assessment and see the dropout rate plummet. But focusing on students' well-being and engagement has a significant effect on their academic career.

Campuses Use CliftonStrengths to Improve Student Well-Being

The importance of student engagement and well-being is why Gallup co-led the [Gallup-Purdue Index](#), the largest representative study of college graduates in U.S. history. From that study,

Gallup assembled its findings into a program of analytics and advice that fits together with almost every college's mission and purpose.

Gallup's elements of well-being do not include every nuance of what's important in life. The elements do, however, represent five broad categories of well-being that are essential to most people, including every student and faculty and staff member on campus.

On campus, the elements of well-being include:

- **Purpose:** liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals, including having an impact on the level of engagement of faculty and staff and these individuals' ability to create excitement for learning and development
- **Social:** having supportive relationships and love in your life, including strong relationships with classmates, professors and staff
- **Financial:** managing your economic life to reduce stress and increase security such as with student loans, college tuition and financial aid
- **Community:** liking where you live, feeling safe and having pride in your community, including pride in the campus, safety in residence halls and feeling a broader sense of belonging
- **Physical:** having good health and enough energy to get things done daily, including nutritious meals and ways for students to eliminate stress in a healthy manner

Higher education offers people the knowledge they need to build an engaged life, and the five elements of well-being are the currency of a life that matters. Using well-being as its framework, Gallup partners with colleges to ask a simple strengths-based question, "As a university, where are we at our best within those five elements, and where are we off?"

Answering this question helps colleges and universities create a strengths-based mission statement that focuses on each student's well-being and engagement.

One large university that uses CliftonStrengths created a mission that states, "We are using a strengths approach on our campus to drive student engagement and contribute to students' community and purpose (career) well-being while at the university and beyond."

Strengths-Based Touchpoints Are Vital to Helping Students Thrive

According to the study in the "Building a Strengths-Based Campus to Support Student Retention" article, when students focus on their strengths, they learn more effectively, which increases student engagement and, thus, retention:

"It is also likely the strengths-based conversations students had within classes or with their professors enhanced students' connectedness to the institution by increasing their self-efficacy, leaving them more confident in their abilities to persist. ... strengths-based activities held within classrooms can have positive effects on students' abilities to learn more effectively, accurately assess their abilities, and become more realistic about future expectations. [Students] may

have also been more motivated to persist over their peers who did not have these conversations due to more intensive faculty interactions and greater satisfaction with their experiences on campus."

Gallup has found that students should have six strengths-based touchpoints a year with a friend, mentor, adviser or professor -- anyone who deliberately helps students direct their strengths -- to live a more engaged and thriving life. These touchpoints don't have to be new. You can integrate them into the programs and organizations that already exist on your campus.

For example, one campus incorporates six yearly touchpoints into its residence life program, academic advising and student organizations. At the residence hall orientation, students learn from each other how their talents influence their interactions. Resident advisers mediate everything from meetings to roommate conflict using strengths to move forward.

Academic advisers meet with students twice a year and use strengths to describe meaningful relationships with their professors and talk about how they achieve success academically. Professors describe their own strengths so that the students in their classes better understand their teaching style.

Finally, student leaders ask their club or organization to describe their group's strengths.

Those touchpoints can have an effect on retention. For instance, according to the study in the "Building a Strengths-Based Campus to Support Student Retention" article:

"The networking opportunities that students received around strengths ... means that students got to know each other first and foremost by learning about the assets they brought with them to campus. The strengths-based connections students had with their peers were associated with the greatest odds of retention in the model."

Connecting students' strengths to campus engagement, means faculty and staff at a college or university:

- keep in mind each student's individual talents
- create an educational experience focused on every student's engagement and well-being
- graduate students who feel well-prepared for life after college

The [CliftonStrengths for Students assessment](#) can help reduce the college dropout rate, and many schools will use it for that alone. But a once-and-done approach to strengths is less effective than [creating a campuswide culture of strengths that focuses on well-being and engagement](#). A single, strengths-based approach will help, and colleges are wise to use it, but a more holistic approach will pay vastly greater dividends.

You can bring the power of strengths-based development to your campus. Start with [CliftonStrengths for Students](#).