

Suggestions for Discovering, Developing and Applying Signature Strengths

To Discover Your Top 5 Strengths:

- Go to either the website on signature strengths at the University of Pennsylvania or the one at the University of Michigan. Each website has additional assessment tools and links to background research.

<http://www.viastrengths.org/> or <http://www.authentic happiness.sas.upenn.edu/>

- Click on the link “VIA Signature Strengths Questionnaire” You must register first, then you will be directed to take the questionnaire. The questionnaire is 220 items, so it will take about 20 minutes to finish. It will be worth your time.
- When you are done, please print the results showing your top 5 strengths or a ranking of all 24 strengths. Warning: our culture inclines us to view lesser strengths as weaknesses, but please do not do this. It will be tempting for you to “work on” a strength with a low ranking, however there is much more opportunity in applying top strengths in better and new ways. For example, Lance Armstrong was (and still is) an average snowboarder. His coaches would not have made him an extraordinary cyclist by asking him to work endlessly on his flips and grabs. Lindsay Jacobellis, a world champion snowboarder, but ordinary cyclist, would not have become a champion by spending 6 hours a day in the saddle. So, the obvious applies: give the board to Lindsey and the bike to Lance. Do the same.

To Apply and Further Develop Your Top 5 Strengths:

- The exercise below on “strengthening strengths” simply asks you to reflect on ways you have used your signature strengths in the past and then it challenges you to reapply them in new ways in the future. Recent research by Chris Peterson (2008) suggests that when people find new ways to engage their strengths, they make significant improvements in their sense of purpose, overall well-being, and life satisfaction.
- The second exercise on “matching strengths” gives you a window to look at how well your strengths are being supported and enabled by important facets of a college environment. Mismatches are associated with frustration, depression and anger. On the other hand, good matches help you develop and flourish. For example, you may discover that an important strength is not being exercised by your academic major, so you might consider changing your major or at least becoming much more involved in extracurricular activities that do exercise this overlooked strength.
- Consider doing these exercises with other students, especially students who share some of your signature strengths. Challenge each other and learn from each other.

Note: If you would like to learn more about Signature Strengths, see Peterson, C. & Seligman, M. (2004). *Character Strengths and Virtues*. Oxford Univ. Press. A copy is probably in your college library.

Strengthening Strengths: Letting College Bring Out the Best in You *(An Example)*

| Top Five Signature Strengths of a “Typical” College Student | Her Examples of Past Uses of Her Signature Strengths | Potential New Applications of Her Strengths at College |
|--|--|--|
| 1. Humor & Playfulness | I used to play tricks and tease friends on the high school soccer team. On long family trips in the car I was the one who got everyone laughing at each other | During the first weeks of classes, to break the ice and ease the stress, I could be more playful with hallmates and classmates. When appropriate, I could humor my RA and maybe some of my professors. |
| 2. Gratitude & Thankfulness | I thanked my high school soccer coach, but have not been that much into thank yous with other important people in my life. | I could write a letter to my parents thanking them for supporting me and promoting me. At the end of the semester I could send thank you notes to faculty and staff and friends who helped me. |
| 3. Capacity to Love & be Loved | I am close to my family. I have a boyfriend back home who I am nuts about. | I am going to find new friends and really invest in them, care for them and have fun with them. I hope to meet and get to know a lot of new people, different people. |
| 4. Appreciation of Beauty & Excellence | I truly enjoy playing on an excellent soccer team or watching other athletes performing at their best. I love taking walks on the river trail in the fall. The river and the trees are so beautiful | Doing well in course work, not just for a grade, but for the joy of doing something excellently could be a goal of mine. I should take a course in photography. |
| 5. Kindness & Generosity | I helped my grandparents and their friends a lot last year. I volunteered once at the YMCA. | I am shy about helping people with severe disabilities or medical problems but feel I should do this. Maybe I'll volunteer to help at a local nursing home? |

Strengthening Strengths: Letting College Bring Out the Best in You

| <u>Your</u> Top Five Signature Strengths | Examples of Past Uses of Your Strengths | Potential New Applications of Your Strengths at College |
|---|--|--|
| 1. | | |
| 2. | | |
| 3. | | |
| 4. | | |
| 5. | | |

Rating the Degree of Match Between Your Signature Strengths and Some Important Facets of College Life

| Your Top Five Signature Strengths | Major | Minor | Best Friend | Boyfriend or Girlfriend | Favorite Hobby | Extracurricular Activity |
|-----------------------------------|-------|-------|-------------|-------------------------|----------------|--------------------------|
| 1) _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 2) _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 3) _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 4) _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| 5) _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |
| TOTAL | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ | _____ |

Rating Instructions: List your top five signature strengths. Then under the column headings "major" "hobby" etc. write in a two-word description of each facet to bring it more clearly into your mind. Finally, rate the degree of fit or compatibility between each strength and each facet of your college life, where a **-1=bad fit**, **0=no fit**, **1=weak fit**, **2=acceptable fit**, **3=good fit**, and **4=excellent fit**.

Reflection Questions: What facets of college life do your strengths match well with (total of 12 or greater) and not so well with (total of 7 or less)? What can you do to maintain strong matches and improve or replace weaker ones?