

Better Achieving our Mission by Incorporating Strengths into our Teaching

By

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Xavier University is a Catholic Institution in the Jesuit tradition. As such, our mission is to educate with specific attention given to ethical issues and values. We seek to develop intellectual skills both for a full life in the human community and service in the Kingdom of God and a sense of the whole person – body, mind, and spirit. Xavier shares in worldwide Jesuit commitment to a creative and intelligent engagement with questions of peace and justice.

Our President and Cabinet have decided it is time to update the university's strategic plan. Four unifying themes that have been identified to guide the development of the new strategic plan are:

1. deepening our commitment to our Jesuit values,
2. enhancing our student experience,
3. strengthening our relationships with our community, and
4. improving our human resources.

One approach we are undertaking to contribute toward each of these unifying themes is to become a strengths based campus. In this paper we will first define strengths. Then we will briefly discuss the process by which we are becoming a strengths based campus. The majority of the paper will discuss how we are attempting to use strengths with each of the unifying themes as we strive to better achieve our mission.

Strength is a developed talent that a person can use to consistently produce excellent results. A talent is a natural way of thinking, feeling, and behaving. Talents can be assessed informally by:

- observing a person yearning to perform certain activities,
- a person quickly learning how to perform certain activities,
- prolonged instances in which an individual is "in the flow" performing exceptionally well,
- momentary instances in which an individual performs admirably, and
- profound satisfaction after an individual performs an activity.

Talents can also be assessed more rapidly and more precisely using a well-designed and researched instrument. At Xavier, we are using StrengthsFinder. This assessment, based upon positive psychology, has been progressively developed over 30 years with over 4 million participants in 150 countries. The on-line assessment takes about 20 minutes and identifies for the respondent the five most dominant talents she possesses out of the 34 possible talent themes. This assessment enables us to quickly help each person – student, faculty, and staff – to begin to understand their unique set of talents. As stated in the following familiar quote from Ephesians, each person has a unique combination of God-given talents.

“Each one of us has received a special gift in proportion to what Christ was given... some to be apostles, others to be prophets, others to be evangelists, others to be pastors and teachers. He did this to prepare all God’s people for the work of Christian service.” Ephesians 4: 7-12.

Two things need to be combined with talents to develop them into strengths. First, through practice a person can develop skill. Better teaching and more practice can help skills develop more quickly. Second, people need to gain both contextual and factual knowledge to be able to better apply their talents. Talents that are developed with skill and knowledge acquisition become strengths. Strengths can be applied well or poorly and can be continually refined and further developed.

We have a responsibility first to help our students discover their talents and then to affirm, develop, and use those talents that are becoming strengths. To the extent we can do this, we help our students respond to Chris Lowney’s challenge “You were born to change the world”.¹ Since we believe that each person has been given a gift of a unique combination of talents from God, we believe something is missing in the world if we do not help all of our students develop their strengths and then utilize them in service.

1. At Xavier, we describe the Jesuit values we strive to follow as:

- a. a mission of engaging and forming students intellectually, morally and spiritually,
- b. reflection to understand our place in the world,
- c. discernment to be open to contributing our lives as we are called,
- d. solidarity and kinship to walk alongside and learn from companions, and
- e. service rooted in faith and justice for the well-being of all.

By first understanding our unique strengths as teachers and then the unique strengths of each student, we are able to provide our students with a lens to better understand their unique talents so they can better discover the Divine in themselves and in the people they serve. This Discovery embraces the reality that the labor of love that God has put into the process needs our active cooperation. Having been thus loved, we share our unique strengths with others who also have been loved into existence. There becomes almost a divine dance led by the God of love who lives within each of us and rejoices at our every move. By embracing their unique strengths our students feel more valued and are more thoughtful in their discernment as they choose majors, study habits, service opportunities, and careers. Now we discuss the five Jesuit values we strive to follow.

Two aspects of our mission that strengths particularly aid are the Ignatian spirituality of finding God in all things and care for the individual person. Understanding the strengths in others helps one to see the Divine in them. As we better understand another, it is easier to tailor our instruction and interaction for their maximum benefit.

A second Jesuit value is reflection. Again, by understanding the strengths others possess, we can understand them better. Also, as we understand how we naturally think and make decisions, our increased self-awareness helps us to better reflect on the world around us and our place within it.

The third Jesuit value is discernment to make better decisions. We listen to our own intuition, to the uniqueness of others' opinions, and feel emotions while thinking critically. The easiest level of decision is right versus wrong – a legalistic view. The next level is one right versus another right – an ethical view. The highest level of decisions is expressed by the Jesuit phrase *Ad Majorem Dei Gloriam* – for the Greater Glory of God. Deep understanding of our unique strengths contributes to making better decisions at each level.

The fourth Jesuit value is solidarity and kinship. Love of God is expressed through love of all of our neighbors. As business faculty we need to continually reinforce the triple bottom line of profits, people, and planet. We model this by demonstrating to our students that our work is a vocation – far more than a job or career. We generously serve and collaborate as we learn from others and expect our students to do the same.

The fifth Jesuit value is service rooted in faith and justice for the well-being of all. We take the viewpoint of the poor and marginalized in our decisions, research, and teaching. As we focus on unique talents each person possesses, it is easier to grasp that all people – no matter how disenfranchised -- are made by and loved by God. Therefore, it is our responsibility to help them.

2. Strengths can help us enhance our student experience by striving to help our students develop wellbeing, by teaching with our strengths, and by building an engaged campus. Five essential elements to wellbeing deal with career, social, financial, physical, and community. If we truly believe in dealing with the whole person, we strive to help our students thrive in each of these areas. Developing and using strengths are helpful in each.

Parker Palmer states that the best teachers “weave a complex web of connections between themselves, their subjects, and their students, so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves”.² Understanding our own unique strengths as well as those of each of our students greatly enhances our ability to weave this web. We role model this by vividly describing how we use our strengths in our subject matter. We then ask our students to reflect on how they plan to use their unique strengths to accomplish the topic at hand when they are in a service engagement or a career position.

An engaged campus is one in which students actively learn, teachers are motivated and relate material to students, and administrators lead as well as manage. We have used strengths to engage students in various honors programs. We have incorporated it into pilot offerings of classes as diverse as diversity and operations management. We have used it to initiate student leadership programs.

3. There are many ways to strengthen relationships within our various communities through better understanding of each person's strengths. For one example, when our students engage in service projects, both the students and the sponsor (the person representing the agency or group being helped) take StrengthsFinder, share their strengths with each other, and develop more effective communication and decision-making methods. For a second example, all of our business students are offered one-on-one executive mentors from our local business community. We will start this fall having both mentors and mentees take StrengthsFinder so the mentors will have another means of advising the students.

4. One way we help both our students and ourselves improve is to focus on the four needs followers have of their leaders: trust, compassion, stability, and hope.³ We use our developing knowledge of each person's unique strengths to develop personal strategies to better develop trust through dependable behavior, compassion through genuine care, stability through constant support, and hope through visionary and proactive leadership. We have had strengths awareness sessions as part of new faculty orientation and with various groups such as our human resources division, various internal leadership programs, and our cabinet.

Strengths help those working through others enhance or maximize performance...this is true for Dept Chairs, Deans, and managers and it can simply be refreshing and reenergizing for people coming to work every day knowing someone is actually looking for ways to make them shine! Having Strengths information provides awareness and this awareness can allow teams/departments to partner most effectively with others, tap into unknown areas of opportunity, place people in positions of greater success, and so on. This is the ultimate reason for Strengths to be adopted by our leadership and managers. This as an effective tool for managers to be proactive with their teams and to help others understand more about people before judging them or being turned off with their way of being in the world.

In this paper we explore how we strive to simultaneously focus more deeply on our Jesuit values, enhance our student experiences, build relationships, and improve our ability to lead at all levels through better understanding and development of the unique strengths each person possesses.

1. Lowney, C. 2009. *Heroic Living: Discover Your Purpose and Change the World*. Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, p. iv.
2. Traub, G. W. (Ed.). 2008. *A Jesuit Education Reader: Contemporary Writings on the Jesuit Mission in Education, Principles, the Issue of Catholic identity, Practical Applications of the Ignatian Way, and More*. Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, p. 314.
3. Rath, T. and B. Conchie. 2008. *Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow*. New York, NY: Gallup Press, p. 82.