

# Professional Development Grant Report

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I was given the opportunity to attend the StrengthsQuest Educators Seminar on January 10– 11, 2008. This was a day and a half of training on understanding, interpreting, and using the Clifton StrengthsFinder – an online inventory tool that assists individuals in exploring their top 5 strength themes. But to really understand what that means, I should step back a little bit and explain more about StrengthsQuest and StrengthsFinder.

StrengthsQuest is sponsored by the Gallup Organization. The Gallup Organization has examined human behavior for over 70 years in order to assist organizations and individuals in developing to their fullest potential. StrengthsQuest was actually designed by Gallup for college students.

The Gallup Organization has conducted more than 2 million interviews with the “best of the best” and have identified 460 talents. Talents are considered potential strengths. StrengthsFinder, the instrument, creates clusters or groups of these talents and comes up with 34 different strength themes. Talents become true strengths when you add knowledge and skills to the talents. Therefore, strengths are developed talents that can help individuals succeed.

A poll was taken asking people which they feel will help them improve the most – either knowing your strengths or knowing your weaknesses. This poll found that often people think of weaknesses first and that these weaknesses must be fixed in order to improve. Actually it was discovered that in the United States, we focus more on strengths than in any other country that participated in the poll. However, we still look to changing the weakness first. For example, almost every college has remediation classes that students must pass before they can go onto other more exciting classes. StrengthsQuest, being based on Positive Psychology, focuses on what is good in the person rather than what is wrong. An example given in my training was looking at two students and their reading talents. One student was an above average reader already reading approximately 300 words per minute. The other student was considered an average reader and read 90 words per minute. The same speed reading intervention was administered to both students. The average reader increased the words to 150. A good jump, but the above average reader increased to 2900 words per minute incrementally a much larger improvement. I called Gallup to find out about this study and it was done in the 1950s through a Nebraska statewide research project. So it goes to show, building upon one’s strengths may be much more productive than fixing one’s weaknesses.

So how can we use this on our campus? Students may benefit from taking this inventory and considering their strengths. Once the inventory is taken on-line the student has access to an individualized website. At this website, students have access to their strengths and the definitions as well as to “Student Action Items” and “Professional Development Action Items.” These action items give suggestions knowing the students strengths and how they might best improve their success in college or what to consider when they are looking for work. For example one of my student action items stated “Prepare for the term by listing the dates of all tests, projects, and papers”. This act would have been very important to me because I have a talent of Responsibility. It is extremely important that I do what I say I’m going to do. The tests, projects, and papers are part of my contract with the professors and I stated I would do them. If something happened and I missed a project because I didn’t know the dates, I would think very negatively of myself and that might

create a downward spiral impacting my other work and eventually drastically impact my grades. Knowing that I have a strength in Responsibility, I can prepare for the semester in ways that suit my talents. These talents may differ from the way someone else would prepare for the semester. As an educational counselor, I could further explore students' strengths and help them discover individualized study techniques that work.

The other action item to make note of is the Professional Development Action Item. An example from one of my top 5 themes in professional development is "Consider roles that ask you to listen and to counsel. You can become adept at helping other people see connection and purpose in everyday occurrences." This action item can help me think about the type of career or work setting in which I might excel. It will also help me determine a major if I hadn't decided already. Or it could re-affirm my choices. As an advisor or counselor working with a student, knowing their strengths would help guide the student towards a major with which they are going to be fulfilled. Ironically, one of the Professional Action Items recommended for my strength of Connectedness was to join an organization like the Peace Corps, AmeriCorps, Habitat for Humanity, or the like. I actually did join the Peace Corps after my undergraduate degree and to this date it was one of the best and most meaningful experiences that I've had.

In these two ways, student learning could greatly be impacted by StrengthsQuest being available at the SJSU campus with people that are trained to help interpret the results and to meet with the students for reflection. I, personally, can meet students individually or do workshops based upon StrengthsQuest. Faculty could ask me to come into a class as well for a presentation. In doing these activities word will slowly spread about this tool that can be used to build success.

Another way to implement StrengthsQuest would be through Professional and Staff Development. StrengthQuest can be used for employees to recognize their own strengths and to become more fulfilled, but also for teams to develop more fully and to become more productive. For example, one of my strengths is Input. I would be a good staff member to do research on a topic or to find resources or referrals that can be used. I will keep going and going. I also like to share this information with others. This is a good talent to have before decisions are made. However, since I value input so much, I might always want more and think it's not enough to make a decision. That's where I would want someone on my team who has the talent of Command. This person would like to take control and make decisions for the group. If you know the talents of the people around you, your team/staff is likely to be stronger and utilized more effectively. I would be willing to come into staff meetings of divisional departments and present this information and do trainings.

I have already begun to share the results of my training. I've had a number of conversations with colleagues who have expressed interest. I will be doing a professional development training with Counseling Services on February 29<sup>th</sup>. I have also begun to use StrengthsQuest individually with students during 1:1 meetings. And I have a workshop designed for students on April 23<sup>rd</sup>. The next step will be to find out if we would like to continue to use the instrument. If that is the case, I have contacted Testing and they are willing to work with Counseling Service to present to CFAC and ask for the ability to charge students who are interested in taking the test. This semester, we will use codes that have been gained as a result of this grant to pilot the instrument.

Anyone who is interested in learning more about StrengthsQuest can go to [www.strengthsquest.com](http://www.strengthsquest.com) Also, I would be more than happy to sit down with people and discuss what I've learned and how we might be able to collaborate on future events/trainings. Contact me at [Deanna.Peck@sjsu.edu](mailto:Deanna.Peck@sjsu.edu)