

What's right with you? Culturally, that's not the usual question, is it? Educationally, American institutions of higher learning have long focused on filling gaps and fixing weaknesses in students.

But does an emphasis on remediation actually yield success? A Deficit Remediation Educational Model can be demoralizing and disillusioning for individuals — including students — who find themselves distilled down to shortcomings and areas for improvement.

Research shows there is indeed a positive method for reaching consistently positive results in academic pursuits, personal lives and careers.

More than 40 years of research in fact. The Father of Strengths Psychology Donald O. Clifton, Ph.D. (1924-2003), in collaboration with colleague Tom Rath and a team of scientists at Gallup, Inc., created the online StrengthsFinder assessment and launched a best-selling series of books devoted to helping millions discover and develop their natural talents. Clifton's underlying premise — "To produce excellence, you must study excellence." — upends the long-standing practice of identifying and fixing weaknesses.

Marian University is embracing the Gallup strengths-based model of learning. In classrooms and offices across campus, people are looking at themselves and others with a new sense of respectful understanding.

Seeds of this positive change have been sprouting on campus for years, thanks to the knowledge and application of Sr. Deborah Golias, CSA, Sr. Deb's deep desire to help students make successful

study and career choices led her to Clifton's research in 1978.

When Steven DiSalvo, Ph.D., came on board as Marian's President in July of 2010, he grasped the deep ramifications of the strengths philosophy and the program bloomed. By January of 2011, he declared Marian University a strengths-based campus, with official acknowledgement from the Gallup headquarters.

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"Our resident expert in this field — Sr. Deborah Golias — was already working with our freshmen on strengths, and it was obvious that the data she was gleaning from this process could be used to improve the entire educational experience at Marian," DiSalvo said. "Recognizing and working with their strengths could boost student engagement and positively affect retention and persistence. Gallup research also shows that a strengths focus improves employee engagement and builds the strengths of the organization as a whole."

What is a 'strength'?

If you aren't familiar with the research, conversations about focusing on the positives of peoples strengths may sound more saccharine than science. But Gallup is a research firm and their work is counted



and quantified, again and again. A "strength," by Gallup's definition, means a talent — a natural way of thinking, feeling and behaving — honed to a point of consistency and excellence. We each have our own unique set of talents working in concert, frequently apparent in early youth and then linked to our top achievements throughout life. Those talents become strengths only when invested with knowledge, skill and time.

After more than 40 years of studying human potential, Gallup summarized that potential into 34 patterns called Themes — with descriptive names like Achiever, Includer and Maximizer clustered into the four encompassing domains of Executing, Influencing, Relationship Building and Strategic Thinking — and created the StrengthsFinder survey. Through a series of online questions, the survey tabulates a person's dominant talent themes and a downloadable guide personalizes the results.

"StrengthsFinder epitomizes the Marian experience," said Kate Candee, vice president for Mission and Retention and an instructor in the GEN 101 courses where all freshmen are introduced to StrengthsQuest. "It provides opportunities for our students to study and learn who they are."

Focusing on talents doesn't mean students ignore challenges or that weaknesses no longer matter. Instead, once aware of areas of strength, the goal is to use these areas of greatest talents to manage

weaknesses. "Talent patterns dictate our learning style," Sr. Deb said.

Student experience

As Director of the First-Year Studies Program, Jennifer Krueger is Sr. Deb's close colleague on the strengths initiative. StrengthsQuest, while powerful, is only one piece of the collective freshman experience: In the GEN 101 first-year seminar class, each student is introduced to the concept of critical thinking and its practical application, and the groups read and discuss the same book. This year's common read is "The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates."

StrengthsQuest is introduced about a month into the semester when peer relationships have formed. Sr. Deb explains the program and how to take the online survey. Once students have their list of top five talents, they begin exploring and applying this new knowledge in a variety of ways, including discussion, reflective writing, and visual representations.

Within the first year of strengths implementation, Krueger began witnessing encouraging student self-discoveries. "One student, in particular, doubted being in college. She thought she had nothing to offer," Krueger recalled. "She is from a low-income family that is not very supportive of higher education. She talked with Sr. Deb about her family background, her criminal justice major and her Restorative

