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# Career Matters: Leveraging Positive Psychology to Guide Us to Good and Right Work

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## **Abstract**

In order to live well, we should love what we do and feel that what we do is important. Some of us struggle with the difficulty of finding our way onto the right life path, while others navigate with energy and enthusiasm to fulfilling, successful lives. What is it that makes the difference? I believe that the principles of positive psychology can be applied to the career navigation process to elevate and enhance our capacity to find good and right work. In this paper, I will look through a positive psychology lens at career development theory and propose a series of interventions for the career navigation process which apply strengths-based interventions that have proven effective in non-career focused settings. Focusing on signature strengths both *in* the career development process and as an element *of* the career goal can provide numerous self-reinforcing, engaging and energizing pathways. The intended outcomes include leveraging of strengths to increase well-being along the way; creative exploration and career discovery; crafting powerful visions of future possibilities; cultivation of hope and perseverance to build resilience; and linking purpose and meaning to career goals to pave the path toward good and right work.

## **Keywords**

career navigation, career decision, career choice, meaningful work, positive psychology, character strengths, signature strengths, work satisfaction, well-being, purpose for learning

## **Disciplines**

Industrial and Organizational Psychology | Organization Development | Other Psychology | Personality and Social Contexts | Psychology | School Psychology | Social Psychology

Career Matters:  
Leveraging Positive Psychology to Guide Us to Good and Right Work

Kerry Sanderson  
University of Pennsylvania

A Capstone Project Submitted  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Applied Positive Psychology

Advisor: Daniel Tomasulo

August 1, 2017

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## Introduction

*“To love what you do and feel that it matters – how could anything be more fun?”*

-Katharine Graham (Howard, 1974)

In order to live well, we should love what we do and feel that what we do is important. Choosing a career path can be confusing, overwhelming and stressful, but it can also be an exciting, enlightening adventure. Considering that most of us will spend an estimated half of our adult lives working, the decisions we make about how and where to work are critical to our well-being and life satisfaction. Work not only provides economic benefits but also becomes our identity. We are defined, particularly in the United States, by what we do and very often the first question we are asked is “What do you do for a living?” Whether deciding on a college major, entering the workforce for the first time, or recalibrating at a more advanced career stage, some of us struggle with the difficulty of finding our way onto the right life path, while others navigate with energy and enthusiasm to fulfilling, successful lives full of meaning and impact. What is it that makes the difference?

Traditionally, career planning has focused on economic considerations with an emphasis on matching an individual’s aptitudes and skills to available jobs, resulting in an exchange of labor for a paycheck. Vocational counseling theories were developed to place more value on discovering an individual’s interests, preferences, talents and personality traits and aligning them with sustainable careers. “Follow your passion” and “do what you love” are common mantras in career coaching. Assessments abound to indicate areas of interest, cognitive and behavioral preferences, personality traits and more. However, there simply are not very many effective interventions to guide the process in a way that supports our desire to live well and do well. I

believe that the principles of positive psychology can be applied to the career navigation process to elevate and enhance our capacity to find good and right work.

Research in positive psychology has demonstrated that aligning work with values, strengths and purpose can lead to increased life satisfaction and well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). More specifically, leveraging our top “signature” character strengths, as identified through the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA Survey) (McGrath, 2017)), can lead to numerous positive outcomes, particularly in the workplace where we can use them every day and in support of meaningful work. I believe that character strengths can offer a framework to inform both the career choice itself, and also the career decision-making process. Embracing our signature strengths and deploying them in the career navigation process can not only provide the positive outcomes associated with using strengths in everyday life, but also make a challenging process more enjoyable and thus “stickier” and more effective.

In this capstone paper, I will look through a positive psychology lens at career development theory to identify opportunities for alignment and integration in leveraging character strengths; linking meaning to career choice; and theoretical models for goal setting, motivation, hope and grit. I then propose a series of interventions and activities for the career navigation process which creatively apply strengths-based interventions that have proven effective in non-career focused settings. These will be comprised of individual interventions, including an activity leveraging each of the 24 character strengths, and group activities for use in workshops and team events. Finally, a program targeted at college students is offered to address the specific challenges of this large career-seeking population. Focusing on character strengths both in the career development process and as an element of the career goal will provide numerous self-reinforcing, engaging and energizing paths to good and right work. The career-



oriented interventions that I propose here are intended to make this process easier, more motivating and more effective by targeting the following positive outcomes:

- Create opportunities to leverage individuals' strengths throughout the process and reap positive outcomes along the way
- Help to effectively narrow down and manage the confusing array of career choices while still providing opportunities for creative exploration and discovery
- Craft powerful visions of future possibilities, buoyed by confidence and self-efficacy
- Build pathways of hope and perseverance to inoculate against inevitable challenges and develop resilience for future bumps in the road
- Link purpose and meaning to career goals to pave the path toward good and right work

### **Career Development Meets Positive Psychology**

I have worked for 16 years in both career management and higher education. I have worked with literally thousands of students and job seekers, in booming economies and devastating downturns. My clients have ranged from teenagers to octogenarians, from Master of Business Administration students at a premier global business school to chronically unemployed job seekers in Arizona's state workforce system. I have witnessed individuals struggle with the difficulty of finding their way onto the right life path. I have also seen others navigate this journey with energy and enthusiasm to find fulfilling, successful lives full of meaning and impact. My own path illustrates the elevation that the principles of positive psychology can bring to career navigation. Faced with an unexpected and unwelcome career transition, I discovered the buoyant power of hope, gratitude, zest and perseverance.

On a beautiful Arizona spring morning in 2008, I was unceremoniously laid off from a job that I considered the love of my life. I had taken a very circuitous route to land in a role that

perfectly aligned with my personal values of education and service. It allowed me to bring the very best of myself into my work and make an impact on my students' futures. In losing this job, I was no longer the person I'd grown to adore. What do you do when you can't answer the question "What do you do?" Who are you then?

When I told my kids and my six-year-old son asked, "Will we get to see you more now?" I began to suspect that there might be a silver lining. Instinctively, I moved past my pride and reached out to friends and colleagues to stay connected. The generosity extended to me was far beyond my expectations. I sought ways to find meaning in my days by helping others who were unemployed, too, and the gratitude I received kept me buoyed through humbling interviews and rejections, dwindling savings, and my own challenging journey.

Through a serendipitous meeting with a former colleague, I was invited to write a blog for the Wall Street Journal Online about my experience as an MBA who was "Laid Off and Looking". I decided that, on this national platform, rather than provide the usual career coach advice, I was going to talk about how it felt: how it felt to lose yourself, how to let go of your pride and ask for help, and how it felt really, really good to experience the kindness of others. I wrote about repeated disappointments, but I also talked about resilience and gratitude. The response from readers was heartfelt, and many job seekers reached out. They shared secrets for finding the good in a rough situation, small moments of beauty, joy and inspiration, and newfound appreciation of the small things that made our lives continue to feel well-lived. It was clear that a positive perspective led to a more open-minded and creative approach to the difficulties of unemployment and more success in our job searches as well as in our lives.

I returned to career coaching, this time with community college students, and I have treasured the opportunity. I love what I do. And I want other people to love their days, too. I get

to hear new stories every day and see into the hearts and souls of people that are searching for their place in the world. I have witnessed, over and over, the moment when their eyes open wide and they see their future. I am deeply grateful every time I get to share this moment with someone and help them recognize the good that they will bring to the world. I find such meaning in the magic and potential of this ripple effect.

This story is about the opportunity to rediscover myself through adversity, and to find clarity and meaning in the service of others. This experience gave my life a purpose again, and helped me make sense of the struggle and find significance in the value I could offer others. To paraphrase Viktor Frankl (1963, p. 79), I realized that life was still expecting something from me. When I was introduced to positive psychology, it was like discovering the sheet music to a song I had learned to play by ear. Now, I am confident the principles of positive psychology can be combined with career development theory to guide us to believe in ourselves, to be hopeful and enthusiastic about our futures, and to have a clear vision of our paths, impact and contribution to the greater community.

### **Origins of Positive Psychology**

Philosophers have long grappled with life's biggest questions, including what makes us happy and how to navigate the path to a good life. Over time and cultures, our concept of well-being and our definition of what makes a good life has shifted and varied (McMahon, 2013). The Ancient Greek philosophers tended to focus on the virtuous life and a love of wisdom. Aristotle believed that "a virtuous person is a happy person" and virtues are developed habits that can be attained through learning (Melchert, 2002, p. 186). The advent of Christianity brought a shift to a belief in happiness and joy only in the afterlife, and then the Enlightenment period in the seventeenth century brought about a return to a focus on the individual's right to happiness and

pleasure as an obligation. During the founding of the United States, emphasis was placed on the individual's right to the pursuit of happiness, though achieving happiness was not necessarily the end in itself. In the 1800's, English philosopher John Stuart Mill advocated focusing not on achieving happiness, but on finding it through a higher purposeful meaning outside oneself (McMahon, 2013). This wide variety of philosophical perspectives across history and societies reveals that we must continue examine what is relevant and real for us in our own context and time.

In the late 1800's, the development of the social sciences, and specifically psychology, led to scientific method being applied to the study of human behavior. William James (1892/1984), philosopher and pioneer of American psychology, emphasized the scientific investigation of subjective experience, and posited that a sustainably good life could be achieved through conscious attention to align moral thoughts with positive actions. The early development of psychological science focused on three distinct areas: relieving mental suffering; supporting productivity and fulfillment in everyday life; and developing high potential talent (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). After World War II, however, psychology more closely followed the disease model of medicine in focusing on curing mental illness, and leaned away from examining philosophical questions of well-being and happiness. Humanistic psychology, through the work of Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, did attempt to offer an alternate holistic approach, including Maslow's well-known theory of self-actualization and the hierarchy of needs to characterize optimal development (1964/1999). This branch of psychology, however, never developed a strong empirical foundation and instead contributed to the popularized "self-help" movement (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

### **The Shift to the Positive**

In his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, Dr. Martin Seligman, now considered the father of positive psychology, advocated a shift in the orientation of psychology. He proposed that both psychology research and application also focus on understanding, developing and cultivating the most positive qualities of individuals and thriving communities (1998). Positive psychology itself is often defined by what it is not, in comparison to traditional psychology which focuses on relieving misery and disabling symptoms. Rather than attempting to cure or fix what is wrong, positive psychologists aim to understand what makes a life well-lived, and to cultivate enabling conditions that support human flourishing (Seligman, 2011). Positive is not simply the absence of negative; there is, in fact, a neutral state in between. Positive psychology and positive intervention practices focus not on relieving distressing symptoms to achieve only the neutral state at best, but on creating intentional actions that enhance and expand positive outcomes in our behavior, emotions and cognition to promote well-being.

Character strengths are the “psychological ingredients” that compose personality and identity, and make us who we are (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13). The classification of these character strengths and virtues is one of the foundational accomplishments of positive psychology. Fifty-five scientists undertook a comprehensive research effort across cultures and history to identify the most commonly endorsed and morally valued components of human character. They identified six categories of ubiquitous character virtues: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Under these broader categories fall 24 specific character strengths, the components that lead us to the valued virtues and put us on the path to well-being (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Research has shown that people who have the

opportunity to use and leverage their top strengths, called “Signature Strengths”, in their daily lives experience more positive emotions and higher life satisfaction, and suffer less stress and depression (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011; Niemiec, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Researchers and practitioners of positive psychology have made great strides in investigating, understanding, and effectively cultivating human flourishing. Several empirically validated models for well-being have been developed. Ryff’s six-factor model of psychological well-being highlights self-acceptance, positive relationships, autonomy, mastery, purpose, and growth as fundamental contributors to our well-being (1989). Diener’s construct of well-being is a global, cognitive and subjective assessment of the quality of life, measurable through three elements: positive affect, negative affect and life satisfaction (1984, 1994). Seligman’s PERMA model which includes Positive emotions; Engagement; Relationships; Meaning; and Accomplishment as the pillars that create the foundation of well-being (2011). Seligman proposed PERMA to capture the central elements that contribute to human flourishing, which can be delineated as follow:

- **Positive emotions:** Positive emotions, whether joy, love, inspiration, amusement or others, contribute to both feeling good and doing good. Frederickson’s (2009) broaden and build theory indicates that positive emotions not only bring pleasure as we experience them, but they cause us to broaden our scope of perspective and to build cognitive and behavioral resources which will help us in the future, including creativity and openness to learning.
- **Engagement:** Engagement involves the experience of optimal functioning or a “flow” state characterized by mindful attention and an absence of emotions and of time awareness. Engagement and flow experiences are activated through the cultivation of our individual

character strengths when faced with a clear and challenging goal (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Positive benefits come from involvement and interest in life activities and tasks, and the capacity to become absorbed in and focused on what we are doing. Identifying and using our top character strengths in school and in work can lead to deeper engagement and fulfillment (Seligman, 2011).

- **Relationships:** Humans need strong social connections to create sustainable well-being. We need to feel we belong; we need to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. We need circles of support surrounding our individual lives – our parents, our romantic loves, our families, our friends, our communities, rippling out to create our networks of social connection. Research shows that strong relationships are closely linked with happiness and life satisfaction (Gable & Gosnell, 2011) and provide many benefits to support our well-being, including strengthening our immune systems and overall health, guarding against depression and enabling us to live longer (Haidt, 2006). Happiness is a social and collective phenomenon that has a positive, sustainable effect over our lifetimes (Fowler & Christakis, 2008).
- **Meaning:** The framework of purpose, values, sense of efficacy and self-worth suggested by Baumeister and Vohs (2002) gives structure to the concept of meaning. We seek meaning to make sense and connections in our lives, to give us purpose and direction aligned with our values, and to anchor our self-worth and self-efficacy (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009). Researcher Tom Rath defines meaning simply as “doing something that benefits another person” (2015, p. 7) and embraces meaning, along with energy and social interactions, as one of three elements essential for daily well-being.

- **Accomplishment:** Accomplishment is often thought of as an outcome and is described in many different ways, including mastery, success, winning, and achievement (Seligman, 2011). Making progress in meaningful work has been indicated as the most important factor in creating career well-being (Amabile & Kramer, 2011). Skill, grit and persistent effort are mechanisms that drive accomplishment and achievement (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007).

### **Positive Organizations**

Positive psychology can be scaled up in organizations through the application of Positive Organizational Scholarship (POS). POS looks at how to make us better and how to flourish as individuals on a larger scale: in our teams, organizations and institutions, and communities. Research from the fields of positive psychology and other social sciences such as sociology, combined with organizational development, management and strategy, can be applied to organizations and teams. We can leverage POS insights and tools that are empirically validated to elevate our organizations so we can individually and collectively perform at our absolute best and, ideally, better serve and create transformative experiences for others. (M. Myers, personal communication, January 14, 2017). Positive organizational scholarship enables our organizations to identify and amplify the unique strengths that give us life and create a “surround-sound” of strengths to enable us to flourish (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2015, p.8). Positive psychology and positive interventions are now commonly applied in a wide array of environments and institutions including education, healthcare, business, non-profit, law, humanities and the arts, sports teams, the military, and in governments at local and national levels.



### **Career Development Theory**

Historically, career planning focused on making economic matches – work needed to be done and someone needed to do it. Markets were smaller and individuals tended to take jobs that were in convenient geographic proximity, in a family business or tradition, or simply took any job that was by chance was available. In the early 1900's, the first vocational theory was developed using a person-environment (P-E) fit model called Trait and Factor theory, grounded in scientific method (Parsons, 1909). Emphasis was placed on matching an individual's aptitudes, skills and talents to available jobs, and although the end goal was still simply viable employment, the job seeker was granted more agency by having a voice in the decision.

In the 1950's, two theories were introduced that are still influential today. Super's (1957) theory of the career development lifespan emphasizes the changing nature of self-concept over life stages and different interventions to manage life and career transitions at each point. Holland's (1959/1997) theory of vocational personalities posited six types: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising and Conventional (RIASEC). Through a self-reported interest-based assessment, individuals can be characterized into these types and may be able to use this information to find a good fit in environments or occupations that align with their type. For example, a Social type enjoys working with other people and will likely be interested and potentially successful in an environment or role that provides the opportunity for social interaction, such as in a school or in the role of pediatric nurse. These vocational practices began to place more value on discovering and aligning an individual's interests, preferences, talents and personality traits to careers with a focus on longevity. Holland's RIASEC types are still widely in use as the framework for numerous empirically validated assessments, including the Strong Interest Inventory, used frequently in educational settings (CPP, 2017) and the O\*NET Interest

Profiler, available at no cost on the U.S. Department of Labor's Occupational Information Network website (National Center for O\*NET Development, 2017).

The changing global environment of the 1980s and 1990s brought about new career models developed to address the uncertainty of this new work environment. Rather than depending on the organization for career management – illustrated by the old stereotype of climbing the career ladder at a single company and retiring with a gold watch – the emphasis was placed on the individual to become accountable for their own career trajectory (Wang & Wanberg, 2017). Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) posits self-efficacy, outcome expectancies and goals, developed through learning experiences, are motivating factors in career choice (Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 1994; Lent, Brown, & Hackett, 2000). SCCT is aligned to Bandura's (1991) general social cognitive theory that individuals have differences in their beliefs around their own agency and capability to behave in a motivated and goal-directed way, and these are developed through observation and social modeling.

In recent years, career guidance and counseling has taken on a more holistic perspective of life design, including an array of factors ranging from economic indicators to personal preferences and passions, self-concept and determination, and lifespan career trajectories (Savickas, 2008; Savickas et al., 2009). The focus of career theory and practice has shifted from simply landing immediate employment to designing a life of flourishing supported by meaningful, fulfilling work.

### **The Reality: Career Decision Challenges**

Making career decisions and pursuing career goals can be challenging in many ways, whether it is our first time exploring career options or if we are redirecting our paths later, by choice or circumstance. Broadly, the process involves several steps: self-assessment; career

exploration; and goal setting. For those new to the workforce, including students in post-secondary institutions, the expansive array of occupations, job titles, and college majors can be confusing and overwhelming. The U.S. Department of Labor lists 1,110 individual occupations within the Standard Occupational Classification system, with each of these including multiple related job titles (National Center for O\*NET Development, 2017). Arizona State University, one of the largest four-year universities in the U.S., offers more than 350 different majors, with multiple course options within each of those tracks (Arizona State University, 2017).

Uncertainty about appropriate career path and lack of confidence in one's own ability to achieve career goals has been noted as negatively impacting college students' academic success and persistence (Hull-Blanks et al., 2005). In order for college students to successfully choose an appropriate major, which they are often encouraged or even required to do during the first semester, they must have a clear idea of a career goal. This requires them to go through the career planning steps of self-assessment, exploration, and decision-making/action planning in a short period of time. Challenges that many students face in navigating the path to this goal include the following:

- Lack of self-awareness regarding what could indicate an individual's "fit" for a particular career, including interests; skills, abilities and aptitudes; personality traits, social and environmental factors; external influences including family and social pressure toward or away from certain careers
- Lack of knowledge regarding potential job and career options; educational and training requirements; relevant economic information, including salary ranges, occupational and market outlooks; future roles and opportunities that may not even exist yet

- Uncertainty and issues with self-efficacy and confidence that a particular career goal can be achieved
- Stress and pressure of transitioning to college as roles and responsibilities change, including more rigorous and/or different academic demands; unfamiliar social context, including trying to make new friends, building relationships with new professors and staff; financial pressures
- Lack of immediate gratification: the decision-making process itself requires an exertion of effort without an immediate reward; more effort is required to achieve the career goal, and future career rewards and benefits are often many years in the future

Students commonly delay the career planning process until later in their college years because their attention and energy are focused on transitional adjustments and academic studies. Often students will change majors, which can be costly and time-consuming, and may require them to take additional courses in the new program over and above courses already taken. The consequences of not having a clear career direction can be serious. They include dropping out, a longer (and costlier) journey through school (Bean & Eaton, 2002), or graduation without securing employment or graduate education. Conversely, having an articulated career goal is linked with higher academic achievement, and higher retention and graduation rates (Hull-Blanks et al., 2005).

For those that are facing transition at another point in their career, the challenges can be just as daunting. Unemployment forced by circumstance, such as downsizing or termination, can be very stressful and can lead to financial difficulties, loss of confidence and self-esteem, and possibly psychological and physical health issues (Wang & Wanberg, 2017). The act of job searching itself has been negatively correlated with well-being (McKee-Ryan, Song, Wanberg, &

Kinicki, 2005). Job seekers whose confidence levels remain high during the search are the exception to this (Wanberg, 1997). Unemployed job seekers are often forced to consider employment in a new field and face the same overwhelming and confusing array of possibilities as college students but with added time urgency. Even if the career transition is voluntary, the decision making process and narrowing of choices is not easy. Factors that correlate with higher reemployment rates and shorter periods of unemployment include more time and effort dedicated to the job search effort, higher levels of social support, and higher levels of self-esteem (Kanfer, Wanberg, & Kantrowitz, 2001).

In order to successfully create positive outcomes for any career plan, whether for a college student or an active job seeker, we must attend to these challenges through adaptable, targeted interventions to leverage individual strengths and build confidence, hope and clarity to elevate the career journey. Many aspects of positive psychology are closely aligned with the most highly endorsed career development theories, and can be applied to enhance and elevate the career discovery and decision making process, including leveraging signature strengths as both a goal and a part of the navigation process.

### **The Building Blocks: Character Strengths**

Character strengths are the “psychological air we breathe” (VIA Institute on Character, 2011). Character strengths can be defined as individuals’ positive characteristics expressed through behavior, thoughts and feelings, and can provide a sense of meaning and fulfillment. They compose personality and identity, and make us who we are (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 13). The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA Survey) is a valid and reliable measurement instrument that determines an individual’s top or “signature” character strengths based on self-reported information (Niemic, 2013). Signature strengths reflect personal identity,

feel authentic and energizing, can produce positive outcomes such as social connectedness, increased well-being, and engagement and contribute to the collective good (R. Niemiec, personal communication, January 13, 2017). The six virtues and corresponding character strengths are classified as follow:

*Table 1: The VIA Classification of Character Strength<sup>1</sup>s*

<b>Virtue</b>	<b>Character Strength</b>	<b>Description</b>
<b>Wisdom and Knowledge:</b> Cognitive strengths that entail the acquisition and use of knowledge	<b>Creativity</b> [originality, ingenuity]	Thinking of novel and productive ways to conceptualize and do things; includes artistic achievement but is not limited to it
	<b>Curiosity</b> [interest, novelty-seeking, openness to experience]	Taking an interest in ongoing experience for its own sake; finding subjects and topics fascinating; exploring and discovering
	<b>Judgment</b> [critical thinking; open-mindedness]	Thinking things through and examining them from all sides; not jumping to conclusions; being able to change one's mind in light of evidence; weighing all evidence fairly
	<b>Love of Learning</b>	Mastering new skills, topics, and bodies of knowledge, whether on one's own or formally; related to the strength of curiosity but goes beyond it to describe the tendency to add systematically to what one knows
	<b>Perspective</b> [wisdom]	Being able to provide wise counsel to others; having ways of looking at the world that make sense to oneself and to other people
<b>Justice:</b>	<b>Teamwork</b> [citizenship, social]	Working well as a member of a group or team; being loyal to the group; doing one's share

<sup>1</sup> adapted from VIA Classification; retrieved from <https://www.viacharacter.org/www/Character-Strengths>

Civic strengths that underlie healthy community life	responsibility, loyalty]	
	<b>Fairness</b>	Treating all people the same according to notions of fairness and justice; not letting personal feelings bias decisions about others; giving everyone a fair chance
	<b>Leadership</b>	Encouraging a group of which one is a member to get things done and at the time maintain time good relations within the group; organizing group activities and seeing that they happen
<b>Transcendence:</b> Strengths that forge connections to the larger universe and provide meaning	<b>Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence</b> [awe, wonder, elevation]	Noticing and appreciating beauty, excellence, and/or skilled performance in various domains of life, from nature to art to mathematics to science to everyday experience
	<b>Gratitude</b>	Being aware of and thankful for the good things that happen; taking time to express thanks
	<b>Hope</b> [optimism, future-mindedness, future orientation]	Expecting the best in the future and working to achieve it; believing that a good future is something that can be brought about
	<b>Spirituality</b> [faith, purpose]	Having coherent beliefs about the higher purpose and meaning of the universe; knowing where one fits within the larger scheme; having beliefs about the meaning of life that shape conduct and provide comfort
	<b>Humor</b> [playfulness]	Liking to laugh and tease; bringing smiles to other people; seeing the light side; making (not necessarily telling) jokes
<b>Courage:</b> Emotional strengths that involve the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition,	<b>Bravery</b> [valor]	Not shrinking from threat, challenge, difficulty, or pain; speaking up for what is right even if there is opposition; acting on convictions even if unpopular; includes physical bravery but is not limited to it
	<b>Zest</b> [vitality, enthusiasm, vigor, energy]	Approaching life with excitement and energy; not doing things halfway or halfheartedly; living life as an adventure; feeling alive and activated

external or internal	<b>Perseverance</b> [persistence, industriousness]	Finishing what one starts; persisting in a course of action in spite of obstacles; “getting it out the door”; taking pleasure in completing tasks
	<b>Honesty</b> [authenticity, integrity]	Speaking the truth but more broadly presenting oneself in a genuine way and acting in a sincere way; being without pretense; taking responsibility for one’s feelings and actions
<b>Temperance:</b> Strengths that protect against excess	<b>Forgiveness</b> [mercy]	Forgiving those who have done wrong; accepting the shortcomings of others; giving people a second chance; not being vengeful
	<b>Humility</b> [modesty]	Letting one’s accomplishments speak for themselves; not regarding oneself as more special than one is
	<b>Prudence</b> [careful; cautious]	Being careful about one’s choices; not taking undue risks; not saying or doing things that might later be regretted
	<b>Self-Regulation</b> [self-control]	Regulating what one feels and does; being disciplined; controlling one’s appetites and emotions
<b>Humanity:</b> Interpersonal strengths that involve tending and befriending others	<b>Social Intelligence</b> [emotional intelligence, personal intelligence]	Being aware of the motives and feelings of other people and oneself; knowing what to do to fit into different social situations; knowing what makes other people tick
	<b>Kindness</b> [generosity, nurturance, care, compassion, altruistic love, niceness]	Helping others and taking care of them; doing favors and good deeds
	<b>Love</b>	Valuing close relations with others, in particular those in which sharing and caring are reciprocated; being close to people

We also may have “phasic” strengths, which may not be in our everyday repertoire but will show up when we need them (Niemic, 2013). Bravery is phasic for many people in that it is not a top signature strength that comes into use every day but is available when necessary, such



as in an emergency. The beauty of character strengths is that we all have each of them in some degree, but we have a unique combination or constellation of strengths that makes us who we are. Blind spots are possible where we don't recognize our own strengths and we may need others to direct the spotlight on them and develop them. Overuse or underuse of our character strengths may lead to negative outcomes, including social anxiety and depression (Freidlin et al., 2017). For instance, if we are overly kind, we may be taken advantage of, or if we feel pressured to hide and not express our true selves honestly, we may suffer ill effects from not being able to embrace our strength of authenticity. Striving for a balance is the key to leveraging each of character strengths to achieve optimal functioning and a good life.

### **Character Strengths and Positive Outcomes**

Research shows that when we are able to exercise our signature strengths in everyday life across all domains (home, work, school, etc.) we will experience more positive emotions and higher life satisfaction, and suffer less stress and depression (Biswas-Diener et al., 2011; Niemiec, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Five character strengths in particular have been shown to have a strong relationship to life satisfaction: hope, zest, gratitude, curiosity and love (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). A higher total score on all 24 character strengths has also been shown to correlate with higher life satisfaction (Ruch, Huber, Beermann, & Proyer, 2007). The character strengths most highly associated with meaning are spirituality, gratitude, hope, zest and curiosity and those strongly related to engagement are zest, curiosity, hope, perseverance and perspective (Peterson, Ruch, Beerman, Park, & Seligman, 2007). Meaning and engagement, two of the five elements of Seligman's PERMA model for flourishing (2011), have been shown to be predictive of life satisfaction (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Character strengths can lead to positive outcomes in the workplace as well. Individual character strengths shown to be most highly associated with job satisfaction include zest, hope, social intelligence and self-regulation (Peterson, Stephens, Park, Lee, & Seligman, 2010). Employees' awareness of their signature strengths is beneficial, but being able to actually apply those strengths is even more important. A study of 10,000 workers showed that those with high knowledge of their top strengths were 9.5 times more likely to report themselves as flourishing than those with low strengths endorsement; those that reported being able to deploy their top strengths were 18 times more likely to indicate they are flourishing (Hone, Jarden, Duncan, & Schofield, 2015). Another study showed that among both volunteers and paid employees, endorsement contributed to meaning, but endorsement and application of character strengths increased both meaning at work and individual well-being (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010).

The use of character strengths at work not only contributes to job satisfaction but also increases productive work behaviors (Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2017). Researchers also found that the congruent use of signature strengths at work – using strengths that are central to the individual and also applicable to the work situation - is important for promoting job satisfaction, pleasure, engagement, and meaning in one's job (Harzer & Ruch, 2012; Harzer & Ruch, 2013). A recent study shows the underuse of three character strengths most highly associated with job satisfaction – zest, social intelligence and self-regulation – can lead to negative outcomes, including social anxiety and depression (Freidlin, Littman-Ovadia, & Niemiec, 2017).

### **Early Exploration of Strengths and Career Theory**

Although empirical evidence clearly indicates that awareness and application of character strengths in the work environment contribute to positive outcomes, very little research has been conducted to explore the potential alignment of career development practices with the use of

character strengths or other positive psychology practices. Traditional career-oriented assessments, including interest inventories that are based on the Holland Vocational Types discussed earlier, can be used to link assessment results directly to a list of suggested occupations based on interest, skills or aptitude matches. These assessments are designed to compare results among individuals, and to outlined profiles of occupations. One individual may indicate a high level of interest in working with their hands and specifically in fixing automobiles, while another indicates no interest at all in those activities. The first person would receive a suggestion that Automotive Mechanic could be an appropriate option for them, and the second person would not. The VIA Survey, however, is not grounded in comparison, but is intended to provide awareness and insight for individuals into their unique strengths profile (Niemiec, 2014). The VIA Survey is intended for personal reflection, not for selection, either for an individual to determine a match with a specific occupational profile or to determine if a candidate is a fit for a particular role.

Preliminary research seems to support the value of applying character strengths in the career counseling process. Littman-Ovadia and her team (2014) conducted a study to compare strengths-based career counseling (SBCC) with traditional career counseling for unemployed job seekers. The subjects that received SBCC completed four sessions of counseling and carried out interventions intended to increase endorsement and development of signature strengths during the time period of the job search, but not directly integrated into it. The control group completed an equivalent number of traditional career counseling sessions with no additional intervention exercises. After three months, the SBCC job seekers demonstrated increased self-esteem when compared to the control group, and a higher rate of employment at 80.6% versus 60%. While this particular study demonstrates the value of leveraging character strengths during job seeking efforts and not specifically in the career decision making process, the results are very promising

and will hopefully encourage further research regarding alignment of career development practices with positive psychology.

### **Meaning in Work**

A life well lived should include work that is meaningful. Research shows that when we are pursuing work that is congruent with our values, we are more likely to experience life satisfaction (Robitschek, 2003), job satisfaction (Holland, 1997), and greater productivity (O'Brien, 2003). When our work is aligned with who we are, providing us with meaning and significance, we are intrinsically motivated and engaged, and create an energizing cycle of “renewable resources” (Mayerson, 2015, p. 4). We seek meaning to make sense and connections in our lives, to give us purpose and direction aligned with our values, and to anchor our self-worth and self-efficacy (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Researcher Tom Rath defines meaning simply as “doing something that benefits another person” (2015, p. 7) and believes we can find it where our strengths and interests intersect with the needs of the world. In a study of 12,000 workers, making progress in meaningful work was indicated as the most important factor in creating career well-being (Amabile & Kramer, 2011).

The interpretation of meaning is a very subjective and individual matter, although our personal construction can be influenced by external norms and perceptions (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Rosso and colleagues (2010) have proposed a comprehensive theoretical framework for meaningfulness in work that seeks to encompass identified sources and mechanisms that could provide pathways of meaning and meaningfulness in the workplace. “Meaning” is defined as the outcome of having made sense of work that is significant, challenging or complete, and is interpreted in the role we each play and through the lens of our personal self-concept and life

context. Rosso et al. (2010) theorize that “meaning” refers to the type of significance or sense we find, and “meaningfulness” refers to the level and the implied positive valence ( p. 95). The four identified sources of meaning in work include the following:

- **Self:** We can find meaning at work through alignment with our values, motivation and/or beliefs. Values can both shape and be shaped by our experiences at work, and so can be considered both a source and a mechanism.
- **Others:** Our relationships with coworkers, leaders, groups and communities can provide meaningful interaction and identity congruence, as well the significance of our work in our family context.
- **Work context:** Meaning in the context of our work has been indicated in design of job tasks and the significance of what we do, as well as how the organizational mission aligns with our values.
- **Spiritual life:** Meaning can be found in work that is self-transcendent and connects us to something greater than ourselves. We may feel a “calling” which can be but is not necessarily, grounded in religion, that is “beckoning” us toward meaningful work that is morally, socially and personally significant (Wrzesniewski, Dekas, & Rosso, 2009).

In addition to sources of meaning, seven categories of mechanisms or pathways to meaning in work have also been identified, including the following six psychological processes and a seventh social pathway. Rosso et al. (2010) present these mechanisms as the “how’s and why’s” of meaning in work (p. 108):

- **Authenticity:** An alignment of behavior and outcomes with our true self, including the endorsement and application of signature strengths, contributing to the experience of self-

concordance, identity affirmation, and personal engagement and energization through work

- **Self-efficacy:** The belief that we have the capacity and ability to create an intended outcome; that we have autonomy and competence to make a difference and an impact (discussed in detail below)
- **Self-esteem:** Our perception of our own worth and value, to create and maintain a positive self-view overall
- **Purpose:** A sense of intentional directedness in our lives and work (Ryff, 1989): a clear purpose connects our current work to a desired future and significant outcomes; a purpose is a compass for supporting our value systems
- **Belongingness:** A shared sense of social identification and belonging to something special; finding our “tribe” provides interpersonal connectedness and mutual support
- **Transcendence:** A sense of connection with something greater or outside of ourselves, making a collective impact; may be an experience of self-abnegation, putting the greater good before individual self-interest, such as to the company’s mission or a religious principle
- **Cultural and interpersonal sensemaking:** A mechanism that focuses not on the fulfillment of individual human needs (as in the mechanisms above), but emphasizes the role of our social context, and how we perceive cues about acceptable and appropriate meaning

To organize the concepts of sources and mechanisms, Rosso et al. propose two dimensions: motivation for individual agency on one end and the desire for communion and connection on the other; and actions that are oriented toward self versus others (family,

organization, etc.). The resulting intersectional quadrants suggest four theoretical pathways to create and maintain experiences of meaningfulness in work:

- **Individuation:** High motivation for agency focused on the self to establish and distinguish one's self worth and value through self-efficacy and self-esteem
- **Self-connection:** High motivation for communion focused on alignment of self-perception with the true self through authenticity
- **Unification:** High motivation for communion and connection to bring the self into harmony with others through purpose and belongingness
- **Contribution:** High motivation for agency in service of something greater than oneself through self-efficacy, purpose, and transcendence

These pathways are not mutually exclusive and one can experience multiple types of meaning through multiple mechanisms. Meaning not only contributes to our well-being (Seligman, 2011), but is also a major factor in deriving satisfaction from work (Schwartz, 2015) it is what elevates our work to a "calling."

### **Work Orientation: Job, Career or Calling**

The way that we view our work can contribute to our positive experiences in this domain. Research has shown that people tend to view their work in one of three categories: as a job, a career or a calling (Baumeister, 1991; Wrzesniewski, McCauley, Rozin, & Schwartz, 1997). People with a job orientation see their work as an economic transaction, a way to earn a paycheck, and their work is not likely to be aligned with their interests and values. A career orientation is a focus on advancement up a specific career path, with motivation stemming from increasing salary level, self-esteem and social status provided by promotions, power and responsibility. Those with a calling orientation, however, are motivated intrinsically by the

rewards of work they perceive as meaningful and fulfilling. Often, they endorse the notion that their truest selves are being expressed through their work (Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, & Tipton, 1985). A calling is deeply personal to each individual, and can be seen as a way to fulfill a unique life purpose that is “beckoning” toward meaningful and significant work (Wrzesniewski et al., 2009).

Notably, the three orientations are specific to the individual but not necessarily to the occupation itself. One study showed that designations of job, career, and calling are distributed across a sample of subjects in two higher education settings (Wrzesniewski et al., 1997). Even in lower level roles such as Administrative Assistant, an equal number of respondents classified their work as a job, career or calling. This study also showed that a calling orientation leads to numerous positive outcomes, including more enjoyment and satisfaction at work. In another study, Harzer and Ruch (2012) found that employees who used four or more of their signature strengths at work were more likely to endorse a calling orientation and had more positive experiences. When individuals are in a role that is not congruent with their signature strengths, either when they do not possess the strengths required for the job or when their personal signature strengths are not applicable, they are far less likely to have positive experiences at work, or to view their work as a calling (Harzer & Ruch; 2012; Harzer & Ruch, 2013). When we are making decisions regarding our future work options, we should seek to identify opportunities that are congruent with our signature strengths, and set ourselves on the path to reap the positive benefits of spending our lives doing work that is meaningful and fulfilling.

### **Goal-Setting Theory and Career Goals**

Choosing a career goal, whether our first or tenth, is a very important decision full of possibilities and implications for the future. To decide whether a career goal is appropriate, we



need to learn more about ourselves through the self-assessment process; narrow down our choices through the discovery and exploration process; determine if our preferred choice is feasible; and create a plan to get there. To move forward, we must be motivated to act. We can look to goal-setting theory for evidence-based strategies that motivate behavior and action toward the achievement of desired outcomes. Research shows goals that are important and consciously chosen with a specific, meaningful purpose are more likely to provide high motivation toward achieving a goal (Locke, 1996). As indicated by expectancy-value theory, our levels of effort and persistence are shaped by expectancy for success in reaching goals (Ryan, Huta, & Deci, 2008). For optimal motivation and performance, goals should be challenging but perceived as attainable. Progress should be recognizable with frequent feedback to build a sense of self-efficacy. Persistence over time can be inspired by growing mastery as we begin to see evidence that we really can do this.

Research also shows that we are more motivated to act when our goals are high-level, with personal importance, significance and meaning (Davis, Kelley, Kim, Tang, & Hicks, 2016). The career goals we define for ourselves should be intrinsically motivating (and not based solely on external motivators like a high salary) and be a fit for our identified top character strengths or it is unlikely that we will find value or enjoyment in our pursuit of them. We can boost well-being through increased engagement and accomplishment when we challenge ourselves with goals that mean something to us and that create a significant sense of purpose. (Seligman, 2011). Career goals can be self-reinforcing and energizing if we leverage our signature strengths in the pursuit of them, and also work toward a goal that is challenging, meaningful and attainable.

### **Motivation: Staying on the Path**

Several internal factors are important to consider in navigating the career development journey, including self-determination, self-efficacy and self-regulation. In order to achieve our goal of intentionally directing our behavior toward pursuing our future career goals, we must be motivated to move forward in the present. Self-determination theory posits that when we are capable of making our own choices and exercising autonomy, we are more likely to successfully integrate change for higher quality of action and positive outcomes (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Autonomy, or the ability to act of our own free will, has been shown as a primary need and source of life satisfaction across cultures (Ryff, 1989; Brown & Ryan, 2015) and is particularly important in choosing a career goal that has such an impact on our future well-being. This determination can come either from the intrinsic motivation of a personally meaningful choice or, when appropriate, from extrinsic sources. Extrinsic motivation can come from social support and intentional challenges to build competence (Brown & Ryan, 2015), such as a teacher or counselor challenging us to consider a career we might not have imagined.

In order to be successful in activating behavior in support of career goal attainment, we must believe we are capable of attaining that goal. Self-efficacy is the perception that we possess - or can develop - the capabilities to produce desired results through our own efforts. Self-efficacy is developed in multiple ways: through our actual performance; our observation of others; imagined scenarios; feedback from others; or how we feel either emotionally or physiologically (Maddux, 2009). As we build more information about our capabilities, we are better able to actually exercise and control them in service of our goal.

Self-regulation, defined as capacity of control to exercise our will and direct our behavior in order to achieve our goals, is cited as one of the most important elements in the

accomplishment of goals (Baumeister, Gailliot, DeWall, & Oaten, 2006) and also in job satisfaction (Peterson et al., 2010). Self-regulation is the distinctly human ability to override our automatic responses, both psychological and physiological, in order to direct our behavior to reach our goals. We can be challenged by unhelpful desires and impulses – including the desire *not* to act. Self-regulation has evolved as an adaptive mechanism that enables us to successfully redirect our behavior. Self-control has been called the enabler of all the virtues (Park et al., 2004). We become our best selves through the cultivation of our character strengths through intentional engagement, and incremental progress toward our significant goals, provided by an increasing level of autonomy and mastery, can create a fulfilling sense of accomplishment on the path to our chosen futures.

### **Moving Forward: Hope and Optimism**

Two powerful elements for leveraging this goal-oriented motivation into forward momentum are hope and optimism. Hope can be defined as our belief of our own capacity to envision clear goals, plan a path (or paths) to reach those, and create the energy and mindset to make those goals possible. Optimism is the expectation that positive things can and will occur in the future, and is associated with higher subjective well-being, even under stressful or adverse conditions (Carver, Scheier, Miller, & Fulford, 2009).

Hope theory states that momentum toward positive change is created through the cycle of goals, pathways and agency (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015). Goals plus pathways plus agency create a link to structure a reciprocal and additive relationship that is both future-facing and action-oriented. Pathways thinking encourages a realistic plan of action, including alternate plans to address possible barriers or challenges, and an individual's agency provides the fuel to launch and maintain momentum. Hope can be identified as a stable trait in some individuals or it can be

created as a contextual state, meaning that it can be cultivated through a targeted intervention (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015, p. 485).

Being optimistic implies a belief in our own ability to face and solve problems and adversities, and contributes to resiliency, the ability to bounce back and recover quickly from challenges. This capacity supports the pathways component of hope theory in moving quickly from plan A to plan B, if necessary. Compared to pessimists, optimists are shown to perform better in school, be more productive and be healthier, both physically and mentally (Reivich & Shatte, 2002).

To create motivational energy and upward cyclical momentum we need to include specific, challenging goals and clear pathways to our career goals and cultivate our belief that a better future life is possible and attainable. Motivational goals and action plans are both important but not individually sufficient to create sustainable positive change. We should strive not to be simply dreamers *or* doers, but to be realistically grounded hoppers, leveraging the additive relationship of belief, goal, action, and agency encompassed in hope to confidently choose and pursue our career aspirations.

### **True Grit: Passion and Perseverance**

Grit, which is defined as passion plus perseverance, has been shown to be a predictive factor in achievement of difficult goals (Duckworth et al., 2007). Essential to grit is persistence, both persistent effort and persistent interests across time, demonstrated as sustained passionate commitment to a goal. Effort is measurable and malleable, and is a specific area where we can truly exercise our free will and choose to make a difference by acting, regardless of current talent or skill level. A growth mindset, believing our talents can be developed through effort, learning and feedback, contributes to working harder and achieving more than those with a fixed mindset,

which is viewing our talents as innate and unchangeable (Dweck, 2006). Self-regulation, a character strength which some individuals show in higher levels than others, is the lever to make this persistent effort happen, and research shows that the combination of high persistence and high passion is key to achievement (Duckworth et al., 2007).

Achievement may not always look the same, though, and we need to consider how it relates to our own interests and signature strengths. In a college setting, for example, we might need to look beyond standardized test scores and grades to reframe academic success. Some students may be passionate about achievement itself: they exert persistent effort in order to get good grades or high test scores and find a sense of mastery in that accomplishment in and of itself. Others, however, need to be motivated by something more personally meaningful, a purpose connected to the subject itself or long-term goals for learning. For instance, students who show a signature strength of creativity may not be concerned with standardized tests but may find complete engagement and flow in an art or music class. Gritty students are predisposed to work longer and harder (Duckworth et al., 2007); some have character strengths other than perseverance and when these are discovered and nurtured igniting the passion in the equation, their grit can kick in pursuit of excellence in that specific area.

Grit can be developed regardless of talent level, IQ, or circumstances. Duckworth (2016) proposes a model of interests, practice, purpose and hope to grow grit from the inside out. We should discover and develop interests that we find intrinsically motivating so that we can sustain them over time, and do this before we try to address any weaknesses. Character strengths have been shown to remain fairly stable over time (Niemi, 2013), which suggests that interests grounded in our signature strengths could support our efforts to sustain this focused energy over time. This passion should be deliberately and faithfully practiced with incrementally difficult

challenges to build our ability, including our capacity to fail and overcome it. Our passion should also be linked to a higher level purpose, which connects us to greater meaning in our everyday efforts. Finally, we must cultivate hope, in the form of the belief that we can always get better, that our effort counts and will lead to better outcomes in the future (Duckworth, 2016). By building grit in connection with the cultivation of our deepest interests and an articulated higher purpose, supported by persistent effort and incremental growth of ability, we are paving the path toward achievement of our career aspirations to do good and right work.

### **Positive Psychology in Action: Positive Interventions**

Through positive interventions, we endeavor to create sustainable change to positively impact individual lives. A positive intervention should include an intentional choice and willful action taken to create a good and desirable outcome. The success of positive interventions depends on these critical factors: an understanding of what can make us better; the capacity to envision that future for ourselves and believe we can get there; the motivation and will to make the effort; and the ability to determine for ourselves what our individual well-being and progress looks like and to find the best fit in order to sustain and embody positive virtues. The activation of these key ingredients is a powerful systemic process, and it changes who we are; this is a constructive and additive process that spirals upward and increases our capacity to live well and do good for the world.

Sin & Lyubomirsky (2009) conducted a meta-analysis of empirical studies of positive interventions to determine if they are effective at increasing well-being. The researchers evaluated the combined results of 51 studies and concluded that when averaged, positive interventions are effective, with the results showing a positive effect on well-being and a decrease in depression. The study showed theoretically grounded and empirically validated

positive interventions exist to create a variety of positive outcomes, including boosting positive emotions; developing and leveraging character strengths, both overall and for specific strengths such as hope and gratitude; cultivating meaning and engagement; increasing social connectedness; and developing mindfulness and focus.

Several moderators, however, were noted to impact the effectiveness of positive interventions, including the age, participation status and cultural background of the subjects, indicating that there is not a “one size fits all” model. Empirical research and evidence can guide us toward those generalized elements integral to designing effective positive interventions but we will be challenged by each individual’s needs, motivations, aspirations, cultural context and innate tendency to adapt to circumstances. The person-activity fit framework is intended to address this issue by taking into consideration many variables that may have an effect on outcomes, including variability based on personality traits, motivation levels, and cultural and ethnic background (Schueller, 2014). In order to successfully create positive outcomes for any career plan, we must be mindful of unique situations and challenges and intentionally build in adaptability and flexibility. We can then design targeted interventions that will leverage individual strengths constellations and build confidence, hope and clarity to elevate the career journey.

### **Strengths-Based Interventions**

While there is no unifying theory or framework to indicate how a practitioner should work with an individual’s character strengths (Niemiec, 2013), there are numerous strengths-based interventions that have been shown to produce lasting positive effects, including increasing happiness, positive emotion, engagement and meaning, and decreasing depression

(Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005; Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013). Seligman and his team (2005) conducted studies to validate the following positive interventions:

- **Using signature strengths in a new way:** Participants took the VIA Survey to identify their signature strengths, and were instructed to use one of these top strengths in a new and different way every day for one week.
- **Identifying signature strengths:** In a briefer version of the exercise above, participants were asked to take the VIA Survey to identify their signature strengths and to use them more often during the next week.
- **Three good things in life:** Every night for one week, participants wrote down three things that went well each day and noted the cause.
- **You at your best:** Participants wrote about a time when they were at their best and describe the personal strengths displayed in the story; they then reviewed their story once a day for a week and to reflect on the strengths they had identified.
- **Gratitude visit.** Within one week, participants wrote and delivered a letter of gratitude in person to someone they had never properly thanked.

The results of the study showed that all of the interventions produced at least short term positive effects, with the Gratitude Visit producing effects up to a month later, and Using Signature Strengths in a New Way and Three Good Things still showing an increase in subjects' self-reported happiness six months out (Seligman et al., 2005).

In a later study, Gander et al. (2013) replicated these results with the same interventions, as well demonstrating similar effects from new interventions designed by either combining the originals or varying them slightly, including “Gratitude Visit and Three Good Things” and “Three Funny Things” which focused on humor rather than gratitude. The original and the new



interventions demonstrated positive effects in increasing subjects' happiness for at least a short time period, and Using Strengths in a New Way again showed longer term positive effects at six months. This study also demonstrated cross-cultural applicability by using German-speaking subjects. The researchers noted that voluntarily working longer on the intervention proved significant in providing more sustainable positive effects (Gander et al., 2013). This supports the notion that positive interventions that are grounded in our own strengths can make them more enjoyable and motivate us to continue, and thus continue to benefit from the positive effects.

Gander et al. (2013) also postulated about possible mechanisms for the positive outcomes demonstrated through these positive interventions. One possibility is that the positive emotions elicited through using one's signature strengths, and connecting and reflecting through gratitude, lead to the development of personal resources as described in Fredrickson's "broaden and build" theory (2009). Another possible mechanism is that intentional focus and attention of the daily interventions can increase particular beneficial capacities such as mindfulness or self-regulation (Gander et al., 2013).

The **Best Possible Selves** (BPS) writing intervention, one of the most empirically validated positive interventions, has been shown to produce both long term positive affect and increased optimism in over 30 studies (Loveday, Lovell, & Jones, 2016). Created by Laura King in 2001, the original BPS intervention instructed participants to imagine and write about their future lives as if everything had gone as well as possible and all their dreams had been achieved. Possible selves are the embodiment of an individual's personal future goals and can be an important bridge between self-concept and motivation (King, 2001). Bringing these vital goals to life in writing can not only crystallize the vision of desired future outcomes in our minds and

hearts, but the process itself leads to positive outcomes and increased optimism (Loveday et al., 2016).

BPS has been shown to be an effective intervention in enhancing well-being in a variety of contexts, making it a valid, beneficial and potentially scalable intervention. BPS can be delivered in person in writing, online or even possibly through spoken words, and all are equally effective in delivering positive affect and increased optimism. BPS has been shown to be effective across different groups, including children, college students and adult populations (Loveday et al., 2016). BPS is a means by which participants articulate their future goals, thus leading to a link between this intervention and enhanced optimism and sense of agency toward the future.

### **Career Matters: Proposed Interventions**

As noted, very little research has been done in applying the theories and practices of positive psychology in the field of career development. Dr. Ryan Niemiec, Education Director of the VIA Institute on Character, articulated the need for “a great VIA and career counseling model to champion” (personal communication, June 19, 2017). I propose here a set of career-oriented positive interventions and activities that creatively apply strengths-based interventions that have proven effective in non-career focused settings. The **Career Matters** activities are intended to provide the following positive outcomes:

- Present a model that allows for flexibility and variety to address individuals’ unique strengths and nuances
- Leverage individual signature strengths as a mechanism to create current positive benefits, thus encouraging intrinsic motivation, more persistent effort and opportunities for enjoyment and energization in a process that can be otherwise challenging

- Narrow down the overwhelming and sometimes demotivating array of occupational choices
- Offer tools to help craft a clear, exciting and attainable vision of future work that is meaningful and fulfilling

### **Integrating Character Strengths**

This set of career-oriented interventional activities is inspired by the work of Tayyab Rashid and Afroze Anjum (2014) as presented in *Ways to Use VIA Character Strengths*, which includes a list of “Suggested Actions” to cultivate each individual character strength. For example, 14 activities are offered to leverage Creativity in everyday life, including the following:

- “Brainstorm ideas on a challenging task with your friends. Observe the ways that they think creatively.
- Redesign your room or home. Rearrange furniture to open up more floor space, even if you don’t buy anything new.” (retrieved from <http://www.viacharacter.org/blog/ways-use-via-strengths/>)

In the same spirit, suggestions for discovering and exploring career possibilities are offered below for each of the 24 character strengths. These activities are designed to integrate career development theory with positive psychology and address one or more of the theoretical components of the career decision making process: assessing strengths and interests; exploring options; characterizing meaningful work; identifying an initial career goal and clear steps to take toward it; and making purposeful effort and progress forward. They are also intended to provide a variety of options to make a potentially challenging process more engaging and productive.

To set the stage, participants will complete both the VIA Survey to discover their signature strengths and a Holland Code (RIASEC) Career Interest Profiler to identify their

vocational personality type. In the career planning phase, the RIASEC categorization is useful for significantly narrowing down the number of occupational options an individual must evaluate to make a fitting career choice, as research shows that three to six options make a desirable range for optimal decision making (Schwartz, 2004). By eliminating a wide range of unsuitable career options (e.g., a Realistic person can rule out most roles that do not involve hands-on work) more intentional focus can be placed on evaluating career paths that are much more likely to provide satisfying and meaningful work.

Once an individual has endorsed their signature strengths, they can choose from the activities that suit their strengths profile. The following is a sample of what could become a much larger collection of career navigation interventions based on strengths-based interventions that have been validated in other settings (Seligman et al., 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009; Gander et al., 2013; Loveday et al., 2016). The activities themselves are aligned with each character strength so that regardless of the career decision outcome, the simple act of performing them can be a positive experience. For example, if I have the signature strength of Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, I will likely enjoy the experience of visiting an art museum whether or not I find inspiration there toward a specific life path. The experience of positive emotions such as awe and joy can broaden my attention and cognitive flexibility, boost my ability to make connections (Fredrickson, 2009) and thus enable me to think more creatively about options for my future.

While exploring different career trajectories, participants can reflect on the following dimensions of both well-being and meaningfulness to evaluate if specific careers might be a good and right fit:

- **Positive emotion:** Does this work offer opportunity for interest and enjoyment, leading to intrinsic motivation?
- **Engagement:** Does this work allow me to leverage most or all of my signature strengths on a daily basis? Is it something that I want to learn - and keep learning - about?
- **Relationships:** Do I feel an affiliation and connection to the people that do this work? Do I feel as though I have found my “tribe”? Do I belong here?
- **Meaning:** Does this work connect me to something greater than myself and enable me to make an impact? Does the work align with my personal values and feel significant?
- **Achievement:** Is this career doable and feasible for me? Might I be able to make meaningful progress toward autonomy and mastery? What might be challenges can I anticipate and how can I plan to address them?

## 24 Signature Strength Activities

### **Curiosity: Be a career tourist**

Approach your career planning as you would approach planning a vacation, with curiosity and anticipation. The world is yours – where are you yearning to go? Consider the options that appeal to you and research the details of that role: talk to “natives” who do that work, ask lots of questions about the culture, learn some of the language and the customs, read up and view pictures and videos. Plan a trip to visit someone as they do the work and experience as much as you can of everyday life. Collect souvenirs (artifacts, interviews, photos, etc.) to help you reflect on your visit.

### **Judgment: Bird by bird**

Writer Anne Lamott describes the following memory from her childhood: “Thirty years ago my older brother, who was ten years old at the time, was trying to get a report on birds

written that he'd had three months to write. [It] was due the next day...he was at the kitchen table close to tears, surrounded by binder paper and pencils and unopened books on birds, immobilized by the hugeness of the task ahead. Then my father sat down beside him, put his arm around my brother's shoulder, and said 'Bird by bird, buddy. Just take it bird by bird.'" (1994). The huge number of career options can be overwhelming, so take it job by job. Create a list of criteria and systematically evaluate each possibility as you funnel down through your options to create a smaller subset to research further.

### **Love of Learning: Go book shopping**

Visit the largest library or bookstore in your area and wander through every aisle, browsing the shelves of books. Pay attention to which sections draw you in – in which areas do you linger? What topics pique your curiosity and create a yearning to learn more? Make note of the areas that you'd like to research further, and challenge yourself to include at least one brand new subject. Reflect on your inclinations and see if you can make meaningful connections to possible career options.

### **Creativity: Mix it up**

Think of the worst job you could ever choose, and have a good laugh imagining yourself trying to do it. Considering your profile of strengths and interests, decide on three career options that are the complete opposite of what seems a good fit for you. If you are thinking, "I would never want to do that job...ever!", note it on your list. Conduct research on the requirements and success factors, and identify the specific reasons why this career is not for you. Next, come up with the counter to your objections – for example, if you rejected a job because it offered no interaction with people, note that social connection could be very important for you. Reflect on your findings and let them guide you toward what elements are essentials for you.

**Perspective: Meet yourself at 90 years old**

Imagine yourself with the opportunity to meet yourself at 90 years old. Ask your older, wiser self to share your life story. Describe your proudest accomplishments and your most joyous moments. What did you do that had the greatest impact? What are some of the challenges that you faced and how did you overcome them? What might be your biggest regret, and what advice would your older self give you now?

**Teamwork: Organize a career navigation team**

Connect with friends, classmates or others in career transition and create a team to support each other. Schedule regular meetings to come together and provide each other with emotional support and social connection, and to share research, information, best practices and new ideas. Give regular “assignments” to hold each other accountable and cultivate motivation and momentum. Reflect each week on progress and give each other feedback. Celebrate effort as a team and have fun!

**Fairness: Interview your future job**

Make a list of three careers that appeal to you that you’d like to learn more about. Find two people that currently work in each of those careers and arrange to interview them. Create a list of questions in advance and make sure you ask everyone the same questions, including “What are your three favorite things and three least favorite things about this job?” Compare the information between each of the two people in the same role so that you have a balanced view, and reflect on how the career profile aligns as a possibility for you.

**Leadership: Teach to learn**

Create and give a presentation on a career field that interests you so that you can teach others about it. Think about how this career impacts your local community and include a description of how you hope to bring your strengths to this role in the future to make a difference for others. What might be some of the challenges that you could face in getting there, and what is your plan for addressing them? Ask for feedback from your audience to help you progress toward this possible future career.

**Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence: Masters Circle**

Create a list of people that you greatly admire in a career field that interests you, both well-known masters and if possible, people that you know personally. Identify exactly what makes them so exceptional and what character strengths they demonstrate. Learn what you can about their backgrounds and how they built up to their current level of excellence. Reflect on what is common among their different profiles and how these align with your own strengths constellation. How can you leverage this knowledge to inspire you on your career journey?

**Gratitude: Three good (future) things**

As you research different career options, keep a list of three good things that you identify about each possible role, opportunities that sound amazing and that you feel you would be grateful for if you could have that future. For instance, if you research nursing, you might list easing patients' pain, developing connections with patients, and comforting patients' families. Reflect back on your list as it grows and look for common elements, such as social connection, and make note of those as essential components of your future plan for good and meaningful work.



**Hope: Make a Best Future Self Map**

Imagine your Best Future Self (BFS) – that you have achieved all of your wildest career aspirations and achieved the best life possible through meaningful work. With this vision of your BFS as your ultimate destination, draw a map that works backward from your BFS to where you are today. What are the steps you need to take along the way, and what might be some of the challenges that you face? Create alternate routes – Path A, Path B, Path C, etc., to help you navigate around possible obstacles. How can you leverage your signature strengths on the various pathways that map to your goal? (Lopez, 2013).

**Spirituality: Sacred moments**

Reflect back on a time when you experienced a moment that felt sacred. Write the story out with as many vivid details as you can recall. What is your definition of sacred? Describe the sensation of sacredness, the type of connection you experienced and how it felt to you. How did this sacred moment bring out what is the very best in you? How can this experience guide you toward what is most meaningful to you and how you might find it in the work that you choose?

**Humor: When I grow up**

Do you remember when you were little and the whole world was open to you? Imagine that you are eight years old and your teacher has assigned you to do a report on what you want to be when you grow up. What is your dream? What do you want to try out because it sounds so fun and exciting? With the freedom and playfulness of a child, create the story of who you want to be and why. Write it out by hand and draw a picture to illustrate it with crayons or colored pencils. Reflect on how it feels to reconnect with the hopeful enthusiasm of a child. What elements came out in your story that surprise you? What parts of the story are particularly

energizing to you? How can you translate those to guide you in navigating your current career journey?

### **Bravery: Board of Advocates**

Think of several people that know you very well and whom you trust to tell you the truth. It takes courage to share the truth, both giving and receiving, so be very thoughtful about the people that you choose. Ask this team of people to act as your Advisory Board to help guide you and advocate for you in the direction of work that can enable you to be your very best. Seek feedback on the strengths they see in you, and suggestions for ways to develop and progress toward meaningful career goals. Approach them with new ideas and questions that come up about whether or not a particular direction seems a good fit for you. Be prepared to receive and absorb truthful answers, whether it is what you expect or not. If they encourage you to try something that sounds hard or scary, do it anyway. Reflect on the feedback you are given and leverage your advocates to energize your career journey.

### **Zest: Set sail on a career adventure**

Choose several career possibilities that you are drawn to and come up with creative ways to “test drive” them through physically experiencing key aspects of the job. Think about parts of the work that seem particularly exciting or energizing – what makes your heart beat a little faster, just thinking about it? For example, if you are interested in teaching, take an improv comedy class to experience what it’s like to speak in front of a group. Consider also environments or people that you are drawn to because of their energy and spend time experiencing this. Have fun attending industry events and meeting different people that do the work you hope to do. Enjoy the exploration and make your career search an adventure!

**Perseverance: Career Will Do List**

The career navigation process can be challenging and lengthy, so in order to stay on track, map out a timeline of planned action steps and target dates. Create a visual representation of your Will Do list and put it where you will see it often as a positive reminder, perhaps on a wall in your home or on an electronic device. For instance, start with taking the VIA Survey and O\*Net Career Interest Profiler and post your results. Pay attention to leveraging your other signature strengths in the process as well to boost your engagement level. Choose target dates by which you will research a list of five possible careers, interview three people in each of those fields, etc. As you accomplish each of these steps, celebrate your incremental progress and visually check them off your list. Seeing the tasks and steps you've accomplished will be a satisfying reminder of progress and inspire you to stay motivated to stay the course toward your ultimate career goal.

**Honesty: Be an investigative reporter**

Conduct an investigation of three of your top career choices, covering the “who,” “what,” “where,” when,” “why” and “how” of each field. Gather the facts and make sure you provide balanced coverage of the pros and cons of each role, and reflect on how they each compare to your own strengths profile, values and aspirations. Evaluate objectively whether each role is a true, authentic fit for you. Create a compelling headline and lead sentence that is brief, specific and true for the story of each career path. Reflect on how this exercise has helped you narrow down what is essential to you in characterizing work that could be fulfilling and meaningful.

**Forgiveness: Recycle a past transgression**

Recall a time that someone criticized you for something of which you were proud. Even if it hurts a little bit, allow yourself to remember what you did to create the pride you felt. What

was the situation, and what were the strengths you showed but perhaps were not appropriately recognized at the time? Reflect on the situation and what might have caused the person to criticize you. Can you see the situation from their point of view and allow yourself to release any negative feelings? Write that person a note of forgiveness; it's up to you to present it to them or not. What energy and enthusiasm can you rekindle to focus on your current strengths and direction?

**Humility: Profile the success of others**

Start with one career option that intrigues you and explore the success factors for that role. Research current job postings to identify the required and desired qualifications of the ideal candidate. Find “shining stars” that are currently excelling in that field and see if you can spot their signature strengths that enable them to shine. Generate success profiles for people in your field of interest, outlining essential skills, interests, knowledge and strengths. Go through this process for several career possibilities and then conduct an objective comparison to your own strengths profile. Seek the feedback of people that know you well to help you get a clear picture of how your signature strengths and capabilities and/or aptitudes align with the success profile you have created.

**Prudence: Proceed with caution**

Make a commitment to determine your career goal so that you have a clear long-term vision toward which you can orient your more immediate effort. Develop a timeline for exploring career options and a set of personal criteria to evaluate each, and make sure you build in enough time to make informed and considered decisions. Once you have narrowed the possibilities down to a set of three or so, test these out in low risk ways. Rather than jumping in head first – such as declaring a major before you are ready or accepting a job in a new,

unfamiliar field – take smaller steps such as signing up for one class or interviewing two or three people who already work in that field. These small strides will add up to make incremental progress toward your goal, and allow you to orient and possibly redirect your immediate effort in service of your long-term vision.

**Self-regulation: Create a career routine**

Career navigation is a lengthy process that often does not have immediate benefits and it can be tempting to divert our attention and effort in other directions. To stay the course, create a career search routine and anchor it, if you can, in another already established habit. For instance, set aside 30 minutes every morning to conduct career research as you enjoy your coffee or listen to podcasts from your field of interest on your daily commute. Map out an overall timeline and determine smaller goals and action steps along the way. If you can establish a daily routine, the actual time commitment does not have to be large but over time will make an impact. Keep in mind the importance of your future goals, and make the commitment to do this for yourself.

**Social Intelligence: Be a positive profiler**

Explore the careers that you are interested in from perspective of psychological and emotional benefits, and create motivation profiles. Connect with several people that are already doing the work that you hope to do and talk to them not just about what they do, but why they do it. Ask about their motivations, and how they perceive meaning and significance in their work. See if you can “strengths spot” the unique strengths constellations of these folks and how those may (or may not) be a fit for their current role. Pay particular attention to their expression of positive emotions, social connectedness and impact, and see if there is alignment with your own motivations.

**Kindness: Volunteer for a new career**

A wonderful way to explore opportunities for new career paths is through volunteering. You can be generous with your time and effort through volunteering with an organization that has meaning to you. You can offer to fill a needed role, which might provide a way to refine or develop capabilities that lead toward future career goals. We are truly at our best when we are committed to a cause that transcends personal needs and makes a contribution to the greater good.

**Love: Fall in love with your future self**

Imagine that you are seeking your future best self and write a “dating” profile highlighting the best qualities you would like to cultivate. What would be the profile of the future you that is the best match for impactful and fulfilling work? How will you recognize and celebrate this best self? Ask for feedback from your loved ones so that they can contribute their perspective of you at your best. Draw up an outline of these qualities and create a plan for cultivating your best self. There might be challenges along the way – can you anticipate how to address potential obstacles in supporting your future self by leveraging your signature strengths?

**Group Activities**

The following interventions are designed to be used in group settings, including in educational settings such as classes or workshops, and for team activities. The interventions involve individual work and reflection, small group discussion, interactive activities and large group feedback. Like the individual activities, these group exercises are founded in strengths-based interventions that have been validated in other settings and aims them toward career-oriented goals.

### **Strengths Constellation**

This intervention is designed to amplify the power of a group's strengths constellation, and can be used in a career development workshop or with a class of students, and presented as a single session or as part of a series (see Best Future Possible Self Oscar Speech and Purpose for Learning session below for a suggested follow-up). Participants will be assigned the VIA Survey prior to attending the session and asked to bring their signature strengths report with them. The meeting room will have posters up with the six Virtues of Wisdom, Justice, Transcendence, Courage, Temperance and Humanity, and corresponding character strengths listed. Each participant will be asked to write their name on five sticky notes and post those under each of their identified signature strengths. This will give each individual a chance to connect and bond with the others that share their strengths and feel a shared sense of pride.

The participants will gather in groups by the virtue under which their top strength falls and discuss the following topics:

- Students will explore possible careers that would be a good fit for each of the represented strengths and why, making connections between character strengths and good work
- Work teams will explore how they can leverage those strengths at work and brainstorm new ways to use them in service of the team's mission.

Each group will capture their conversation on a flip chart and report out to the group. This activity is designed to develop numerous positive outcomes including individual sense of self-worth; group cohesion and sense of belonging; and spread of positive affect.

Next, the following discussion prompts for a pair and share activity will help participants to consider how they might leverage their signature strengths in order to benefit others:

- Tell a story about how you have used each of your signature strengths in a positive way.

- How in the past have you made a difference and how much did that connection to a bigger purpose influence your desire to be in college/do this work?
- When you use one of your strengths to help someone, how do you feel? Who else do you think could benefit from your strengths?

The group will come back together to discuss their answers and share ideas and feedback. After the team discussion, participants will be asked to complete a writing task reflecting on their answers to the prompts and to create a plan for a “Strengths to Make a Difference” challenge to use each signature strength over the next week in a positive, helpful way, similar to the validated intervention of use your strengths in a new way (Seligman et. al, 2005).

A follow-up activity for a group that will be located in the same classroom or physical space for a period of time is to create a “Strengths Tree” that is a positive visual reminder of the team’s strengths constellation. Like a family tree, the Strengths Tree is a representation of how we are related through our strengths – we can see who has the same strengths as us - and also of the group’s breadth and depth across the six virtues and 24 character strengths. Further, by leaving sticky notes and pens out, we can encourage the team to “strengths spot” for each other and leave notes of gratitude and positive feedback on the tree by the noted person’s strength. For example, when I observe my team member make a special effort to show patience to a classmate, I will “spot” her kindness on a thank you note and post it on the tree to highlight her effort and display of character. Thus, we benefit from a visual display of our “Strengths & Thanks Tree”. By identifying and amplifying the unique strengths that give the team life, these interventions can illuminate a surround-sound of strengths to enable all to flourish (Cooperrider & Godwin, 2015).



**Best Future Self Oscar Speech**

The Best Future Self (BFS) Oscar Speech exercise follows the Group Signature Strengths activity and builds on the Best Future Self (BFS) Map exercise, both described above.

Participants are given the following instructions:

“Imagine that you have achieved all of your wildest career aspirations and cultivated the best life possible through meaningful work. It’s just been announced that you won an “Oscar”, a lifetime achievement award for your work in your field! You are invited to write and deliver an acceptance speech to your peers and fans. Include the story of your journey, of where you started and how you got to where you are today. What were some of the challenges that you faced, the effort you needed to make along the way, and how you navigated around obstacles? How did you leverage your signature strengths on the various pathways to your ultimate life’s work? Don’t forget to thank the people that supported you and were there for you in your journey. “

Each participating “winner” will actually deliver their speech to the group as if in the exciting and high energy moment of accepting their award. They are invited not only to imagine and physically embody their aspirations for the future, but to develop the framework for a hope-based career plan by considering the obstacles that might come up along the way, how they can use their strengths to overcome them, and to anticipate the support they will need from their social connections. (Lopez, 2013). Hope theory of goals, agency and pathways includes mental rehearsal to anchor agentic momentum (Magyar-Moe & Lopez, 2015), and the inclusion of a physical component in the delivery of the speech in the future self role can allow for the embodiment of that experience to create “muscle memory” (Shusterman, 2006, p.17). In addition, building gratitude into the intervention can contribute to broadening of perspective and building of psychological resources, including creativity (Fredrickson, 2013). By articulating and

embodying their future career goals and the path(s) necessary to reach them, participants can see their way more clearly and realistically to cultivate self-efficacy, motivation and energy toward achieving them.

### **Career Matters in College**

In leveraging positive interventions to guide career navigation toward good and right work, one group that warrants special consideration is college students. Over 2.5 million students are currently enrolled in college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015), and almost every individual made the choice to attend with the intention of accessing new or better work upon graduation. The transition from high school to college – or from real life back to college – presents significant new challenges as roles and responsibilities change. College students will likely face more rigorous and/or different academic demands, increased financial pressures, and many will be challenged by an unfamiliar social context, including building relationships with new classmates, professors and staff. Even though more students are enrolling in college than ever before, too few end up completing their degrees. The state of Arizona, where I live and work, has one of the lowest community college completion rates in the nation, with only 29% of our students completing a credential within six years (Arizona Community Colleges, 2016).

Research indicates that teaching both the skills of academic achievement and the skills of well-being are not only both individually desirable but are synergistic, contributing to measured increases in both (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). Positive psychology has shown that the skills to achieve a good and meaningful life are learnable (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Educational institutions, particularly post-secondary institutions where students are asked to make impactful career goal decisions, can be the ideal environment to launch a shift toward focusing on both. The following proposed intervention is intended to contribute to students'

capacity to persist and stay in school and to complete degree or certificate programs that put them on the path to fulfilling careers.

Uncertainty about appropriate career path and lack of confidence in one's own ability to achieve career goals has been noted as negatively impacting academic success and persistence in college studies (Hull-Blanks, et al., 2005). This intervention is designed to build self-worth and self-efficacy by giving students of all ages the experience of identifying and exercising their strengths; setting a clear path that is in alignment with their desires, hopes and values; and helping to connect learning to a meaningful purpose for their long-term life path.

In addition to knowing and leveraging their character strengths, college students benefit from having a clearly articulated purpose for learning (Yeager et al., 2014). A sense of purpose helps students see that their current school work, even if it is seemingly not connected to their real lives, is contributing to the achievement of their meaningful long-term goals (Yeager et al., 2014). Students' sense of purpose helps them to set and pursue goals by providing the *why* – the reason they are working toward those goals. Goals can be self-oriented (for one's own benefit or based on one's own preferences) or self-transcendent (for the greater good). Research has shown that setting goals that are *both* self-oriented and self-transcendent is especially powerful because it enables students to develop intrinsic motivation for everyday tasks and schoolwork (Yeager, Bundick, & Johnson, 2012). Students who have identified a career goal that is both self-oriented and self-transcendent display higher self-regulation in completing day-to-day tasks and persist longer in college (Yeager et al., 2014).

### **Purpose for Learning**

The following strengths-based intervention is a follow-up to the Group Signature Strengths intervention and guides students through the process of linking a self-oriented,

strengths-aligned career goal to a specific, self-transcendent purpose for learning. The goals of this activity are as follow:

- Use signature strengths to determine fulfilling career choices
- Discuss how students would like to more broadly impact the community
- Recognize why articulating a purpose is important, including staying focused when faced with challenges
- Link career goals and self-transcendent goals to create a purpose for learning
- Link purpose for learning to current course content

This session is an interactive discussion of how to align students' signature strengths, career aspirations, and self-transcendent goals identified in the previous session to articulate a purpose for learning to guide energy and effort in college. The purpose discussion will open with the following quote to highlight the impact of choosing prosocial goals:

*"It's only when you hitch your wagon to something bigger than yourself that you realize your true potential and discover the role you'll play in writing the next great chapter in the American story."* -President Barack Obama, Wesleyan University Commencement Speech, 2008 (retrieved from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=77361>)

Students will be asked to pair up and share their answers to the following questions:

- What career or major interests you? Why?
- How does it align with your signature strengths?
- How does doing this job make people's lives better?
- How does doing this job make your community better?

The class will then come back together to discuss their answers with the larger group. After the class discussion, students will be asked to complete a writing task capturing their answers to the following prompts:

- Complete the following statement: **I will become a** (*fill in the career you have chosen*) **using my signature strengths of** (*fill in individual strengths*) **because I can make people's lives better by** (*fill in the impact you will have*) – this is your **purpose for learning!**
- List the classes you are taking and for each answer this question:
  - Why is learning this subject important to my purpose?
  - How will it help me make people's lives better?
  - What might be challenging in this class, and how will remembering my purpose for learning help me face this challenge?
  - Who on campus might be able to help me work toward my purpose for learning (a faculty member, a staff member, a department with useful resources)?

This early intervention leveraging signature character strengths and a purpose for learning is intended to guide students in understanding their own constellation of strengths to build confidence, intrinsic motivation and perseverance in college, and to set them on a course toward meaningful and fulfilling careers.

### **Conclusion: Research and Future Directions**

Career choice is one of life's most important, impactful and challenging decisions. The application of positive psychology theory and interventions to the field of career development is poised for further research. To meaningfully enhance the process of career navigation, targeted studies should be performed to test both the integrated theories and the specific interventions proposed in this capstone project. The positive results postulated here include both objective and

subjective outcomes. Objective outcomes include clarity of and confidence in career field choice or college major declaration. Subjective outcomes include levels of positive engagement during the career discovery process; and measures of well-being, life satisfaction and perception of work as meaningful and/or as a calling. These could each be measured over time through and after the career navigation process, and potentially again each time an individual makes a career transition. While such studies would be expensive and resource intensive (especially longitudinal studies measuring vocational and life outcomes years after the initial career-search process), this research would nonetheless be extremely worthwhile. As demonstrated in this paper, the effect of career choice has an enormous impact on major components of life satisfaction and well-being. There are currently not enough validated interventions to guide the career navigation process in a way that supports our desire to live well and do well. Further research could provide the empirical evidence needed to validate and advance the integration of positive psychology and career development.

I believe there is tremendous opportunity to leverage the concepts and empirically backed interventions of positive psychology in combination with well established career development theory to transform our career and life trajectories. I hope that through positive interventions such as the Career Matters activities proposed here, we can create inspiration and energy through the celebration and alignment of signature strengths with career goals that are attainable and meaningful, and cultivate realistic optimism and the belief that our dreams are possible.

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