

The Case for Character Strengths in College Admissions Advising:
The Way You Are Is a Great Way to Be

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Abstract

Graduating from high school and moving on to college is one of the most important transitions in a young person's life. Unfortunately, the process leading up to that milestone—during which a student considers and applies to specific colleges—is often viewed as a pointlessly painful gauntlet rather than an opportunity for growth. It does not have to be that way. Rather than a negative and anxiety-provoking experience, the college search process has the potential to be a period of increasing positivity and openness to possibilities. Evidence has demonstrated that self-knowledge of character strengths can reduce stress, inspire optimism, and increase well-being, as it has been proven to do in relationships and in a variety of settings. This paper introduces the VIA Character Strengths to the college advising process and explores their potential benefit to high school students applying to college, using evidence-based research. A framework and suggestions for character strengths interventions are provided in the context of the college application timeline. Since the potential benefits of character strengths have not been validated with young people undergoing the unique situation of the college admission process, a research study is proposed to test the first of seven interventions. Additionally, a presentation introducing character strengths to college advisors is included. By improving outcomes such as diminishing stress and increasing attributes related to well-being, applying to college becomes an enriched process.

Keywords: character strengths, signature strengths, college advising, college applications, transition to college, best-fit college

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The Case for Character Strengths in College Admissions Advising:

The Way You Are Is a Great Way to Be

Experiences with my own family, college advising, and positive psychology inspired my exploration of character strengths and their value to college-going students.

College Advising: My Path

When my eldest child, Michael, was applying to college, his small school sent a clear message to parents: hands-off. Except for college-touring, the school said it was fully prepared to support the entire application process. The result? My son was not admitted to any of his preferred schools and the two that offered admission did not have his chosen major, jazz composition. Furthermore, I did not think either college was a good fit. Michael enrolled in one anyway, thinking he had no other options. Sadly, when registering for classes, he immediately changed his major from music to business and abandoned his dreams. I did not know at the time the Michael's experience was common in the college application process (Johnson & Rockkind, 2010).

When it was time for my next child to begin the application process, I hired the best independent college advisor I could find and read everything I could unearth on the topic. Alec's application process resulted in a better outcome, but it became apparent to me that I knew at least as much as the advisor I hired. Intrigued by the field, I pursued an education in Career Planning and College Advising at the University of California, Berkeley and have been working in the field ever since, a span approaching 10 years.

Early on in my new career, I realized that our family's initial experience was not unusual. My work as a college advisor has developed into a national practice and includes students of diverse backgrounds, socioeconomic status, talents, and academic performance, and yet the

students all have stress and anxiety in common. The cohort to which current students belong, the Internet Generation (iGen) or Gen Z (students born 1995 and after), is characterized in part by their fragility due to overprotection, attributes that are on full display when I work with them as a college advisor (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Twenge, 2017). Today's high school students experience a high incidence of anxiety and depression (American Psychological Association, 2013, 2018; Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018). One reason for the increase in stress is real or perceived academic pressure (Bocella, 2007; Feld & Shusterman, 2015; Leonard et al., 2015). Stress and anxiety can reduce learning capacity and negatively impact sleep and health (Lund, Reider, Whiting, & Prichard, 2010; Yasin & Dzulkifli, 2011). Though it has not been specifically researched, the college application process adds to the general pressure cooker that is the lot for many high school students today.

Recently, I asked 20 high school graduates and their parents to provide me with five adjectives that honestly describe the overall college application process. Keep in mind that each of these students had successfully navigated the admissions process and would be attending one of their desired universities in the fall. Despite satisfying searches and the personalized support they received, they still viewed the overall process as negative; in fact, negative adjectives outnumbered positive ones by a ratio of 4:1, a balance that becomes immediately apparent in the word cloud that I made from the responses which appears in Figure 1 of Appendix A. As further indication of the problems in the sphere of college admissions, the college completion rate in the U.S. hovers around an underwhelming 60% within six years; this means that of those who begin college, 40% still have not finished a degree after six years (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018). Meanwhile, college admission is perceived to be more competitive. The publication by selective universities of the rate of admission, usually in the single digits,

perpetuates this fallacy. In actuality, it is becoming easier to gain admission to college, just not to the most selective colleges in the nation. Together, colleges on average accept 65 % of applicants, ranging from below 10% to 90% (National Association of College Admissions Counseling [NACAC], 2018a). The number of college applicants—versus applications—has been declining since 2010 (NCES, 2018). Colleges report year-over-year increases in the number of application in 10 of the last 15 years with the rise being attributed to the 35% of students now applying to seven or more colleges (NACAC, 2018a). The development of the Common Application and the Universal Application have made it easier than ever to submit an application, but the flood of resulting requests produces a perverse effect: The more applications a college receives, the lower the acceptance rate and the more difficult (and negative) the admissions process is perceived.

Not all college advisors are prepared to support students adequately through the application process, much less mitigate its negative effects. Many simply *hang out their shingle* after helping their own child through the process. They repeat for others what they think worked for their child. Thus, college advising is still very much an emerging field, one created by the twin forces of cutbacks in institutionally-based high school counseling departments and increased applications (and therefore competition) to enter colleges (Johnson & Rochkind, 2010). The bad news about the Wild West state of affairs is that the process often does not live up to its potential to serve students. An example of the current college frenzy can be found in the recent college advising scandal. Fifty adults were charged with fraudulently securing admissions for their children in prestigious universities (Medina, Benner, & Taylor, 2019). Several students had their offers of acceptance rescinded and many of those charged have pleaded guilty. The

crimes demonstrate the lengths to which some will go to achieve admittance to prestigious brand name universities.

In contrast, ethical college advisors seek to find the *best-fit* college for each student they serve—that is, where students will maximize their academic, social, and experiential learning, and *flourish*. Thriving at college has less to do with the particular institutions and more to do with the makeup of the student body, professors, and administration. What are the values of the organization? The pedagogical philosophy? The vibe? The outcomes? The opportunities for experiential learning? College advisors should lead, support, and guide students to find the best fit college while maintaining high ethical standards as outlined by several professional organizations but, as noted above, such is not always the case (Higher Education Consultants Organization [HECA], 2019; Independent Educational Consultants Association [IECA], 2019; NACAC, 2018b).

Recognizing that there must be a better way and given the recent scandals, it clearly is past time for new approaches, I set out to find ways to decrease that negativity of the process. This paper seeks to address how factors such as well-being can be addressed and even increased during the college search. Which assessments do the best job of helping young adults to identify their strengths? How might the advising process include experiences aimed at helping students to evaluate things that do, and do not, add to their sense of well-being, meaning, and fulfillment? Are there ways in which the college search process can be modified to make it more positive and less about the risk of failure? What research-based approaches could help college-bound students flourish? Ultimately, the college application process should become a time of opportunity and expansion, an affirming and strengthening endeavor.

Why Positive Psychology?

To begin, let me provide an overview of my observations from the field, over nearly 10 years of college-advising, to depict the genesis of my desire to find ways to mediate the stress associated with applying to college, and ultimately led to my pursuit of a Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) degree. Next, a brief background of both positive psychology and character strengths will be provided as the basis of the rationale for including character strengths in the college application process. While there are many positive psychological interventions that could be applied to the college application process, character strengths have particular promise. Finally, suggestions will be provided for applying character strengths to the college application process.

I completed my academic preparation for college advising through the University of California, Berkeley's credentialing program. This program laid out a best practice model that included the utilization of data—objective information such as GPA, test scores, and rigor of curriculum—as an essential resource. Advisors are urged to use this data to evaluate how successfully individuals will operate successfully within the new system of college; for example, data is analyzed to show how a student stacks up against the profile of freshman classes at various institutions based on grade point average (GPA), coursework, and test scores. The best practice model also includes a range of qualitative assessments and interest surveys that practitioners are trained to administer and interpret, such as Holland Codes (Wille, De Fruyt, Dingemans, & Vergauwe, 2015). College advisors seek to understand each student's unique strengths, needs, values, and academic record in order to find best-fit colleges (HECA, 2019; IECA, 2019).

One of the most challenging, though important, activities of an advisor's role relates to the college essay. The goal of the advisor is to help students develop an essay that brings their *paper persona* to life. Effective essays require students to articulate their own strengths through identification of personal stories and experiences that demonstrate personal traits. For example, an Eagle Scout may choose to write about leadership. However, since Eagle Scouts are generally assumed to possess leadership qualities, the onus is on the student to go deeper, to explore further and explain beyond leadership, what characteristics proceed from this achievement. Perhaps the Eagle Scout, through training other Scouts, demonstrated kindness, patience, or a skill such as public speaking. While it is easy for me to see how student experiences can lead to meaningful essays, I have learned how hard it is for students to tell positive stories about themselves.

Several years ago, a student I will call Levia had above-average grades and test scores. She was more involved in extracurricular activities than many high school students and her involvement seemed to be driven by genuine passion rather than resume-building. Her assessments (e.g., one of the major finders and the VIA Character Strengths Survey) indicated interests in marketing, communication, history, and languages, with personality traits that included curiosity and kindness. Yet when we sat down together in her family's kitchen to brainstorm ideas about stories that might become the basis of an essay, she became emotional and could not think of any. That moment made me realize how much pressure young adults put on themselves. Additionally, even though all students have many strengths, they still cannot see themselves through a strengths lens. Perhaps because of social media, achievements of their siblings, or parental pressure, some—many, even—do not see themselves *as good as others*, or *as good as they are supposed to be* (Anderson & Jiang, 2018; Conner, Pope, & Galloway, 2010;

Hirsch, 2019). College selection is seen as more of an opportunity to fail, rather than to leap forward.

Sometime after this experience with Levia, I encountered positive psychology. Initially, I viewed a TED talk (2004) online by the founder of the field, Martin Seligman, and read his books, *Authentic Happiness* (2002) and *Flourish* (2011). I began to experiment with applying some positive psychology principles in my work with clients. After I began integrating the VIA Character Strengths Survey, the first thing I noticed was the change in my interactions with students. They became more open, asked more questions, and were more comfortable with vulnerability. Reports also seemed to trigger students' recollections of stories that illustrated who they were, which led to discussions about how that might enable them to contribute to a university community. Instead of writing about mission trips, winning the big game, or the ability to accomplish anything through hard work—common tropes—students crafted essays that were authentic and unique. This strengthened their applications, general satisfaction with the process, and provided validation. I can attest that specific stories in application essays likely made the difference for some students' acceptance to their top preferred school. Significantly, helping students to discover and articulate their character strengths led to a more fulfilling college application experience overall. I wondered, if my observations were coincidental, or could there be scientific evidence that supports them?

While I later determined that there is no specific research about the application of character strengths evaluations and interventions to the college application process, research has demonstrated that writing about one's values can decrease stress and improve performance (Cohen & Sherman, 2014). Similarly, individuals writing about their *Best Possible Self* (BPS)—a well-researched positive intervention—enjoyed increased optimism, health, positive affect, and

well-being (Loveday, Lovell, & Jones, 2018). Peer-reviewed positive psychology studies have also demonstrated links between strength-based activities, personal growth, and well-being (Donaldson, Dollwet, & Rao, 2015; Gillham et al., 2011).

Through my fledgling efforts, I began to imagine how the process itself might be different, how it might actually enhance positivity, help students understand their strengths, and launch them on a path toward a meaningful and satisfying life. I imagined a model for college advising that explicitly considered and sought to enhance well-being. Before I could develop such a model, however, I knew that I needed a solid grounding in the field of positive psychology.

The Promise of Positive Psychology

In his 1998 address to the American Psychological Association (APA), Martin Seligman, then President, suggested a paradigm shift in the science of psychology (Seligman, 1998; Peterson, 2006). Up to that point, psychology had focused on maladies such as depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, and schizophrenia with admirable success. Scientific progress had been made on several of these ailments. Seligman acknowledged the value of traditional psychological endeavors and went further to suggest consideration of an expanded model. What if the APA members devoted attention to those who were not suffering from psychological disorders? What if, through the use of the same scientific methods utilized in the study of traditional—negative—psychology, focus was broadened to explore psychological health and discover what makes for a life well-lived? After Seligman's APA address, positive psychology re-emerged as a new field of study.

Positive psychology is concerned with the science of well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). At the heart of this discipline are questions such as what makes for a

life well-lived? How much of one's happiness is determined by genetics, location, culture, economics, education, social-standing, or outlook? (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Empirical studies by Seligman and his colleagues have led to the development of many insights and interventions that can improve human flourishing. As a result, websites like www.authentichappiness.org now make available, at no charge, a toolbox of tests to assess one's happiness and well-being.

Seligman (2011) has developed a model for individual well-being that includes five components: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA) as elucidated in Table 1:

Table 1

PERMA Model of Well-being

PERMA Component	Example
Positive Emotions	Pleasurable experiences such as a back rub, or positive emotions such as joy and awe.
Engagement	Being so engrossed in an activity, one loses track of time, forgets to eat, etc. In positive psychology engagement is <i>flow</i> (Csikzentmihalyi, 1975/2000)
Relationships	Positive connections, e.g., friends, loved ones, positive professional relationships
Meaning	Having a sense of purpose; being connected to something larger than self
Accomplishment	Achievement, success in an endeavor, expertise

Note. Adapted from “Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being,” by M. E. P. Seligman, 2011. Published by Simon & Shuster, New York, NY. And from “Beyond boredom and anxiety,” by M. Csikszentmihalyi, 2000. Published by Jossey-Bass, San Francisco, CA. (Original work published 1975).

Each element of PERMA can be increased to enhance well-being in adults and children (Seligman, 2011). For example, 13-to-17-year-old children who are taught the elements of PERMA and followed for two years had less depression than their counterparts (Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, 2015). In another study, introverted students who took action to become more outgoing, social, and build relationships reported happier moods (Fleeson, Malanos, & Achille, 2002).

Beyond defining the components of well-being—PERMA—positive psychology has been able to illuminate activities that can increase well-being. Hundreds of these activities, or *positive interventions*, have been identified, which are evidence-based or empirically tested (Gander, Proyer, Ruch, & Wyss, 2013; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). For example, the positive intervention *Three Good Things*—participants recognize and identify three things that went well each day—has been proven to increase happiness and decrease depression for up to six months in a randomized, double-blind, placebo-controlled study. Another intervention, *The Gratitude Visit*, increased well-being for up to a month (Seligman et al., 2005). Positive interventions are other ways in which positive psychology can offer a roadmap to happiness.

Positive psychology has developed into a field with many specific areas of research including optimism, resilience, high-quality relationships, positivity, decision-making, mindsets, mindfulness, hope, and gratitude, to name a few (Peterson, 2006; Warren, Donaldson, & Donaldson, 2017). The field continues to expand and grow in interest and influence; within it, character strengths have received significant attention and is the subject of hundreds of peer-reviewed studies (VIA Institute on Character, 2019a). As I approached the notion of enhancing the model of college advising, it was this aspect that struck me as having the greatest potential to

transform the college search process from a negative experience into one with both short-term and long-term positive benefits for students.

Character Strengths: An Overview

One key line of investigation within the field of positive psychology focuses on individual traits—such as kindness, curiosity, and perseverance—that most make us who we are (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Seligman and collaborator Chris Peterson termed these traits character strengths, which they define as universally valued moral traits that contribute to *the good life* and do not diminish other people (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Led by Chris Peterson, 55 scholars and positive psychology practitioners collaborated over a period of three years to identify virtues that lead to a meaningful life (Niemi, 2018; Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Character was studied from the perspectives of various disciplines including philosophy, religion, history, and psychology spanning 2,500 years. Historical texts from Aristotle, Plato, and Socrates to Ben Franklin, William James, and the Buddha were analyzed. Codes of conduct from various organizations were reviewed. Ultimately, six virtues were identified that were then linked to 24 universally regarded character strengths (Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005). With deeper study, small changes in strengths have been made (e.g., integrity became honesty and vitality became zest). The 24 virtues and strengths as currently defined are detailed in Table 2.

Table 2

Character Strengths and Virtues

Virtues	Strengths
Courage	Bravery, Honesty, Perseverance, Zest
Humanity	Kindness, Love, Social Intelligence
Justice	Fairness, Leadership, Teamwork
Temperance	Forgiveness, Humility, Prudence, Self-Regulation
Transcendence	Appreciation of Beauty and Excellence, Gratitude, Hope, Humor, Spirituality
Wisdom	Creativity, Curiosity, Love-of-Learning, Perspective, Judgment

Note. Adapted from “Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners, by R. Niemiec, 2018. Published by Hogrefe, Boston, MA.

Humans often focus on what is negative (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001). In contrast, character strengths and virtues are positive for oneself and others and represent what is optimal to humans (Niemiec, 2018; Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). Identifying these virtues can be useful for enhancing one’s well-being. For instance, if someone wants to be more courageous, honing the character strengths of bravery, honesty, perseverance, or zest can lead to increasing this virtue. Similarly, to grow in humanity, one might focus on exercising kindness, love, or social intelligence (Schutte & Malouff, 2018). Combinations of character strengths are unique to the individual and offer a roadmap to well-being in various settings from home to schools and various work settings.

Character strengths have now been scientifically validated in over 30 countries and even some remote cultures, including the Maasai in Kenya and the Inuit in Northern Greenland (McGrath, 2014; Niemiec, 2013). Strengths that did not demonstrate worldwide value—such as

ambition, which is highly regarded in the United States—were excluded (Niemiec, 2013; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Before the development of this character strengths framework, no unified, comprehensive, and universal language or tool existed to evaluate the finest qualities in humans (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

The VIA Character Strengths Survey was developed as a self-reported measurement tool to gauge an individual's 24 strengths categorized by the six virtues (McGrath, 2019). Each character strength is measured in terms of degrees (one to five) and can be ranked from highest to lowest (one to 24). The VIA Institute on Character website (<https://www.viacharacter.org>) offers the survey free of charge in versions for both adults and youth (ages 10-17). The test is easy to administer, takes approximately 15 minutes to complete and the results are immediately available. The VIA Survey has now been taken by over 7 million people from every country in the world since 2004 (VIA Institute on Character, 2019b; Niemiec, 2018). It has been translated into 37 languages, and over 500 scientific studies have explored its value and validity in various contexts. The VIA Character Strength Survey continues to grow in popularity; in fact, every 15 seconds, someone, somewhere in the world, takes the test (personal communication Ryan Niemiec, February 8, 2019; VIA Institute on Character, 2019a).

Signature strengths, a subset of the 24 character strengths, are those that are highest for an individual. These strengths are critical to a person's identity and their unique way of living in the world. Signature strengths are effortless to use, essential to a person's being, and energizing (Niemiec, 2018; Niemiec & McGrath, 2019; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). For example, a person with the signature strength of kindness will find it easy, pleasurable, and rewarding to be kind. Thus, utilizing their signature strength of kindness contributes to their own well-being as well as that of others. Even though twin studies have demonstrated that there is a small genetic

tie to strengths, the strengths of humor, love, modesty, and teamwork are shaped by family environment and upbringing and thus, possible to modify (Steger et al., 2007). However, across one's lifetime, signature strengths generally remain constant and consistent with only slight changes (Niemiec, 2018).

The VIA Institute on Character is not the only provider of test for strengths. The Gallup Organization offers a similar psychological assessment tool, CliftonStrengthsFinder (Hodges & Clifton, 2004). However, I have chosen to use the VIA Survey for several reasons. Over 500 papers have validated the VIA Survey making it potentially more reliable (Niemiec 2018; VIA Institute on Character, 2019a). The VIA Institute on Character also provides a variety of free resources for implementing character strengths on the website VIAcharacter.org. Resources include fact sheets, blogs, and videos that are available for use by individuals and practitioners. Finally, the VIA Survey is applicable in all contexts while CliftonStrengthsFinder is predominantly used in work settings and has a career focus.

Ryan Niemiec, Education Director at the VIA Institute on Character, is heavily cited throughout this paper and for good reason. In addition to his work at the VIA Institute on Character, he has authored or co-authored several books including *Character Strengths and Interventions* (2018), *Mindfulness and Character Strengths: A Practical Guide to Flourishing* (2014), and *The Power of Character Strengths and Interventions: Appreciate and Ignite Your Personality* (2019). Niemiec has published over 60 peer-reviewed articles on character strengths or related topics. He is a sought-after speaker, an adjunct professor at Xavier University and University of Pennsylvania, and a visiting lecturer at many other institutions. These accomplishments, among others, have made Niemiec the recognized worldwide leader

advancing the science of character strengths. His work is foundational to my understanding of character strengths and the model I propose in this paper.

Using signature strengths has the potential to increase well-being, enhance relationships, improve resilience, and create more productive organizations (Niemić, 2018; Peterson & Seligman, 2004, Lavy & Littman-Ovadia, 2016; McQuaid, Niemić, & Doman, 2018; Veldorale-Brogan, Bradford, & Vail, 2010). A meta-analysis demonstrated that using signature strengths across a variety of settings had the potential to increase life satisfaction (Schutte & Malouff, 2018). Use of signature strengths has been shown to assist with mood regulation (Lavy, Littman-Ovadia, & Bareli, 2014). Furthermore, in randomized controlled studies, individuals who were asked to use their signature strengths in a new way for a full week enjoyed enhancements to their well-being that lasted up to six months (Seligman et al., 2005). In addition to individuals, organizations are more likely to thrive when employees are better able to utilize their signature strengths (Littman-Ovadia & Steger, 2010; Wagner & Harter, 2006). More specifically, research has shown that using signature strengths in the workplace can increase the happiness of employees (Harzer & Ruch, 2013, 2016). Evidence from many studies shows that with focus, one can develop character strengths and as a result live a happier life.

As interventions, character strengths can be used in multiple ways. For example, Niemić (2018, p. 40) suggests utilizing the *Aware-Explore-Apply* (A-E-A) model. The model requires knowing one's character strengths (being *Aware*), connecting them with past and current experiences (to *Explore*), and beginning to use strengths in everyday life (learning to *Apply*). This versatility of character strengths interventions allows for adaptation to various situations.

An excellent way to begin to develop skills associated with applying character strengths is strengths-spotting, that is, becoming adept at labeling and identifying strengths in one's self

and others (Linley, 2006; Niemiec, 2018, p 51). Niemiec (2018, p. 51) suggests the following steps using the *Spotting-Explain-Appreciate* (S-E-A) model: *Spotting* the strength, *Explaining* what was witnessed, and *Appreciating* the strength in others. For example, when someone shares a heartfelt, “You were brave to tell such a personal story,” both parties benefit. Notice that the strength of bravery is identified and the reasoning is specifically explained. To demonstrate appreciation, one might explain why a strength is valued; expressing appreciation for a strength is particularly helpful in close relationships (Lavy et al., 2014). Strengths-spotting is an easy way to become familiar with the use of character strengths.

As I encountered these and other findings about character strengths, and considered its potential to elicit positive change, I become more and more convinced that it could help address issues driving the predominantly negative experience of applying to college.

The Role of Character in College Admissions

Several years ago, I was seated next to the Director of Admissions for a highly selective university at a professional conference. During lunch, I proposed the following scenario: If only one spot was available in the incoming class of freshmen, and two applicants were identically qualified for it, how would she make the decision? She answered, “I would ask myself ‘Who I would want to room with for a year?’” Many colleges, as exemplified by this hypothetical decision, seek students who are kind, of good character, and will contribute to the college community, in addition to being academically prepared. In the real world, such a situation would rarely exist, but her answer reveals an important underlying consideration in admission decisions.

In the past, a student’s character was evaluated based on application essays, interviews, and recommendations. Recently, college admissions personnel have begun to turn to applicants’

social media for clues about their character; in 2018, Harvard revoked offers to 10 students due to inappropriate social media postings (Inside Higher Ed, 2018). Several colleges have developed and are testing rubrics to evaluate character strengths that they believe contribute to success. Over 500 universities and colleges have examined the function and value of strengths education (Bower & Lopez, 2010). A new professional organization, The Character Collaborative, established in 2016, is comprised of college deans, admissions counselors, college advisors, and major institutions, such as the College Board, ACT, and Enrollment Management Organization (EMO). This new organization aims to elevate the role of character in the college application process. Several member colleges—including Carnegie Mellon, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Bucknell University—have begun to experiment with tools to evaluate character as part of the college admissions decision making process. While the role of character is becoming an important consideration, publicized college rankings continue to have a significant impact on the industry, parents, and students.

Many believe that attending Harvard, Princeton, Yale, or Penn will guarantee a happy and successful life. On the contrary, a good college experience is dependent upon students having quality relationships (Gallup, 2014; Osterman, 2000). Students learn best from professors they trust (Cavanagh et al., 2018). The transition from high school to college can be one of the most difficult periods in a person's life (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt 1994; Giddan, 1988). Suddenly, young adults are living in a new place, eating in cafeterias, often without friends or a sense of social belonging. Such isolation, and the resulting loneliness, is positively correlated with poor health (Haney, 2018; Peterson, 2006). What makes for a good college experience and lifelong well-being are factors like having a close circle of supportive friends and studying with a professor who cares about the student (Coccia, & Darling, 2016; Gallup, 2014; Waters, 2015).

We all need to feel connected, relate, and feel that we belong (Haidt, 2006; Haidt, Seder, & Kesebir, 2008; Gable & Gosnell, 2011). Those at the center of a large social circle of happy individuals are more likely to have a future filled with happiness (Christakis & Fowler, 2012; Fowler & Christakis, 2009). One study found that a brief social belonging intervention increased the academic performance of minorities (Walton, & Cohen, 2011). Clearly, relationships are important for college success *and* universities can improve students' sense of connection and belonging. The relationships one builds in college, and how one feels about those relationships, matters more than the college one attends.

As a practical example of the value of relationships in a college experience, consider this question: Which student is less likely to graduate in four years: the student living in a single, double, triple, or quad room? Jose Bowen (as cited in Volk, 2018), President of Goucher College, says that the student living alone in a single is less likely to graduate on time, based on his research. The reason? Loneliness (Inside Higher Ed, 2017). Students isolated in a single are less likely to make new friends and more likely to stay connected to their old friends via social media. The combined effect of which is loneliness which decreases their well-being (Haney, 2018; Peterson, 2006; Volk, 2018). By the same token, the students who live farthest from the bathroom in the dorms are also more likely to graduate on time than those who live closest to the bathroom (Bowen, as cited in Volk, 2018). While the reason is not clear, Bowen (as cited in Volk, 2018) postulates that students who walk farther to take shower, or to a common area, have more opportunities to interact with classmates and make connections and friendships. The potential to form and deepen relationships is thus an important factor to be considered when deciding upon a college.

In addition to relationships, Dale and Kruegar (2011) in a groundbreaking study, found that the personal qualities one brings to one's education matters more than the institution they attend. For example, a student who gains admittance to Harvard but then chooses to attend the University of Alabama has the same lifetime salary prospects as the student who attends Harvard. Some find it preposterous to think that a student who makes it into all eight Ivy Leagues would pick the University of Alabama, but student Ronald Nelson did just that (Bruni, 2015). Dale and Kruegar's research indicates that Nelson's lifetime earning potential will be the same as his Ivy League peers. He recently graduated from the University of Alabama, is now attending Columbia University's Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons, and is expected to complete his Doctor of Medicine degree in 2023 (Nelson, n.d.).

Many high-ranked colleges enjoy reputations superior to actual student results such as life outcomes and earnings; as many as one-third are overrated (Alumni Factor, 2013). It will not surprise many to learn that Princeton leads the list of private universities, or that Morehouse and Spelman do not make the top 50 (U.S. News and World Report, 2019). However, *this* likely will surprise some: When alumni are asked to rate their colleges on criteria including overall college experience, financial success, happiness, and value, Morehouse and Spelman perform highest (Alumni Factor, 2013). Colleges like Appalachian State (#7), Sewanee: The University of the South (#9) and Grinnell (#16) are ranked in the top 20 in an overall assessment by alumni (Alumni Factor, 2013). Harvard and Princeton do not make the same top 20 list. In a different ranking, one for financial success and happiness, the U.S. Naval Academy holds the top spot, followed by Washington and Lee (Alumni Factor, 2013). Just because a university is highly ranked in mainstream outlets like *U.S. News* does not mean it is the best place for all. Humans are complex, and it follows that one size does not fit all for colleges, just like almost everything

else. In fact, the Alumni Factor (2013) has concluded through its research that the number one determinant of overall college success, according to alumni ratings, is friendship development, not rankings or reputation. What is good for one student may not be a good for another. Thus traditional ranking like those in *U.S. News* are poor guides for choosing the right college.

Character Strengths in Teens and Young Adult Populations

Before I propose an enhanced model for the college advising process, it is important to understand what is different—or the same—when it comes to the potential application of character strengths in a youth population. It has been found that character strengths can play an important role in academic achievement, student engagement, and school functioning (Park & Peterson, 2008; Weber, Wagner, & Ruch, 2016). After controlling for IQ, certain character strengths such as perspective, hope, honesty, fairness, perseverance, and gratitude were predictive of year-end grade point average in high school students (Park & Peterson, 2008). Another study of college students found that all 24 character strengths correlated strongly with life satisfaction, 22 with college satisfaction, and 16 with academic achievement (i.e., GPA; Duan, Ho, Tang, Li, & Zhang, 2014; Lounsbury, Fisher, Levy, & Welsh, 2009).

Based on this strong relationship between character strengths and academic performance and well-being in youth, a number of researchers have concluded that character strengths surveys should be routinely included in assessments used by college advisors with their high school students (Duan, Zhao, Guo, 2018; Park, 2004; Weber et al., 2016). Indeed, many high schools have done just that and found such tools beneficial, not only in advising, but in general education (Linkins, Niemiec, Gillham, & Mayerson, 2015). The Positivity Project had brought character strengths training to 188 schools and noted an increase in participating students' self-confidence; teachers also reported observing a 22% increase in students' peer relationships (Positivity

Project, 2019). The Knowledge Is Power (KIPP, 2019) public charter schools have made character an integral part of the curriculum following Seligman's framework (KIPP, 2019). Character strengths education is significantly related to student well-being (Waters, 2011).

Little research has been done on the effectiveness of character strengths as part of the college advising process among high school students. However, at the college level, it has been found that students who participated in strengths-based career advising were happier with their experience as compared to those who were advised in a traditional manner (Howell, 2010; Kosine, Steger, & Duncan, 2008; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2014; Schreiner, 2000; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). Given the research that has demonstrated positive outcomes in work settings, primary and secondary schools, and career advising, there is a compelling argument to extend the usage of character strengths to the college advising process.

Character Strengths and College Advising: Towards an Enriched Model for Advising College-Bound Students

With the end goal of the college search process being admission into a *best-fit* college, an assessment should help determine where a student will thrive. A best-fit college is one that has the potential to be a college *home* that will help students maximize their academic, social, and experiential learning. The search itself has the opportunity immediately to enhance students' confidence and well-being, and, during their college careers and beyond, to help them *flourish*.

To understand how an enriched process would advance these goals, it is important to be familiar with current best practices for college advising. I was credentialed by the University of California, Berkeley. UC Berkeley's program complies with all generally accepted principles and ethical and professional standards as adopted and promulgated by the National Association for College Admissions Counseling (NACAC), the Independent Educational Consultants

Association (IECA) and the Higher Education Consultants Association (HECA). These professional organizations promote a practical process that begins as early as a student's high school freshman or sophomore year and continues through the college adjustment period, which, in my experience, can last from one day to an entire year. Beyond the admissions process, college advising programs include required courses in counseling techniques for educators, the ins and outs of financial aid, and a practicum (University of California, Berkeley, 2019; University of California Los Angeles, 2019). The education also includes training in administration and interpretation of major and career interest inventories, such as Holland Codes (Wille et al., 2015). Since beginning my career, I have counseled more than 200 students individually, over 500 in classes I taught, and thousands in community and school-based forums.

The first two columns of Table 3 reflect an example of current standard practices at various points for a typical junior/rising senior. The third column, which I will discuss subsequently as part of a beta model, shows how character strengths will be layered onto the existing basic process.

Table 3

Sample Character Strength Interventions for College Admissions Advising

Timeframe	Example of Standard Process	Enriched Process
<p>Fall of junior year (or before, depending on the student's readiness)</p>	<p>Assessments such as Holland Codes</p> <p>Plan for PSAT, SAT or ACT and subject tests if needed</p> <p>Register for the SAT or ACT and subject tests if needed</p> <p>Discuss college requirements, e.g., size, location, and activities</p>	<p><u>Know Who You Are</u></p> <p>Intervention #1: Watch/discuss video: <i>The Science of Character Strengths/VIA</i> Have students guess their top five character strengths</p> <p>Intervention #2: Have student take VIA Youth or Adult Character Strength Survey (15 minutes) Share findings – probe for understanding of terms using VIA cards; structured reflection on findings (Niemi, 2018) Explain, develop a plan, and implement next intervention</p> <p>Intervention #3: <i>Using Your Signature Strengths in a New Way for a Week</i></p>
<p>At next meeting (can be done in person, ideally, or via internet)</p>	<p>Discuss preliminary college list</p> <p>Address any questions or concerns</p> <p>Review timeline</p>	<p>Debrief Intervention #3: <i>Using Your Signature Strengths in a New Way for a Week</i></p> <p><u>Be Who You Are</u></p> <p>Intervention #4: <i>Strengths-Spotting In Friends And Family</i> Alternative Intervention #4: Explain, develop, plan and implement this intervention</p> <p>First Alternative Intervention <i>Strengths-Spotting in Movie and Book Characters</i> Second Alternative Intervention #4 Who do you Admire and What Ch Second Alternative Intervention #4: <i>Who Do You Admire and What Character Strengths do they Exemplify?</i></p>

Timeframe	Example of Standard Process	Enriched Process
<p>Winter of junior year</p>	<p>Register for the SAT, or ACT and Subject tests if needed.</p> <p>Review of first semester academic performance Curriculum planning for senior year</p> <p>Begin to plan summer activities</p> <p>High school curriculum planning</p> <p>Update college list Address any questions or concerns</p> <p>Review timeline</p>	<p>Debrief intervention #4: <i>Strengths-Spotting In Friends and Family</i></p> <p>Intervention #5: Strengths-Spotting in Self Explain, develop, plan and implement this intervention</p>
<p>Spring of junior year</p>	<p>Finalize summer activities</p> <p>Update college list</p> <p>Address any questions or concerns</p> <p>Review timeline</p>	<p>Debrief intervention #5: <i>Strengths-Spotting in Self</i></p> <p><u>Live Who You Are</u> Intervention #6: You at Your Best Explain, develop a plan, and implement this intervention</p>
<p>Summer of junior year</p>	<p>Begin College Essay</p> <p>Update College List</p> <p>Begin Applications</p>	<p>Debrief intervention #6: <i>You at Your Best</i></p> <p>Intervention #7 You at Your Future Best Explain, develop a plan, and implement this intervention</p> <p>Review past interventions for essay ideas</p> <p>Alternatively, ask student to come up additional stories that exemplify their character strengths</p>

Note. The data in column 3, Enriched Process is adapted from “Character Strengths

Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners, by R. Niemiec, 2018. Published by Hogrefe, Boston, MA.

A Beta Model for an Enriched College Application and Consideration Process

Not long after I completed Berkeley's credentialing program and began to gain experience, I enhanced the typical college advising approach to address students' psychological readiness and enthusiasm (or lack thereof) for the process. For example, I initially incorporated fun creative writing techniques to help students loosen up before generating potential essay topics. After being exposed to Seligman's work, I began to utilize the VIA Character Strengths Survey in an attempt to have students focus on their best attributes and inject more positivity into the process. More recently, I incorporated the Aware-Explore-Apply model laid out in Niemiec's (2018) book, *Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners*. As an adaptation to my audience, I revised the nomenclature for the model to, "Know Who You Are—Be Who You Are—Live Who You Are."

Based on my experience and findings in the research literature, I propose an enhanced model for college advising and outline a beta test for the model. Seven interventions will be offered over the course of the junior year/rising senior period, spread throughout each phase. Particular steps should be adjusted by the advisor according to the needs of the student and the particulars of each unique situation and the advisor's practice style. The suggested steps are outlined in Appendix C and an introductory presentation for college advisors is detailed in Appendix H.

Before embarking on a search process as part of this beta test, I will urge participating college advisors to do some homework of their own. I found it profoundly helpful to take the VIA Survey myself. For me and for many, as noted by the research, the experience leads to an *aha* moment that provided new insights into one's behavior (Urban, Linver, Thompson,

Davidson, & Lorimer, 2018). For example, my signature strengths include humor and playfulness. I was shocked that this strength topped my list. However, when I questioned my friends and family, they enthusiastically endorsed the results. Furthermore, with reflection, I was struck with how easy it was to recall stories that demonstrated my signature strengths. It was this realization that caused me to start using the VIA Character Strength Survey with students during the essay process.

In addition, there are a few additional steps advisors should take to deepen their understanding of character strengths. I recommend developing an inventory of digestible definitions that will be used to explain characters strengths to a student. Having committed examples of the 24 strengths to memory increases credibility whereas relying on a book may diminish it. For those who would like even more in-depth information on character strengths, I highly recommend Niemiec's (2018) book, *Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners*. The information that follows draws heavily from this work.

Each step of the suggested process that follows is outlined in the Appendices. Keep in mind that this model is no cookie cutter process; it is important for each counselor to adapt the interventions set forth to meet the needs of the particular students they serve and advance the application process in a positive manner (Jenkins & Keefe, 2002).

Know who you are (aware). When considering their *ideal* college, most students focus on the physical environment (e.g., location, aesthetics, and campus layout) rather than social or academic fit (Gilbreath, Kim, & Nichols, 2011). To determine fit and make the right college choice, however, a student must start with themselves. Unfortunately, many students start exploring college websites and reading guidebooks before acquiring this knowledge. If a student understands their authentic self, they will have greater confidence and move more smoothly

through the application process (Curran & Wexler, 2017). Character strengths can help students discover and describe who they are.

Students in middle adolescence (14- to 18-year-olds) are still developing their identity; a positive identity makes advancing into adulthood easier (Tsang, Hui, & Law, 2012). While many students are familiar with the concept of character, given their stage of development, accurately describing their own character often proves difficult. Furthermore, the idea of character strengths may be foreign. Therefore, before a student takes the VIA Survey, a short explanation of character strengths will be delivered. As a support and first intervention, advisors will share the eight-minute video, *The Science of Character Strengths/VIA* (VIA Institute on Character, 2019c), which I have found to be an effective tool for introducing the concepts of character strengths to high school students. After watching it, the advisor will reinforce key points:

- Character strengths are unique to the individual; six sextillion combinations of character strengths are possible (personal communication Ryan Niemiec, February 8, 2019).
- A focus on one's strengths can lead to a more meaningful, happier life.
- The benefits of character strength use are supported by scientific research.
- Appreciating character strengths in others can enhance relationships.
- Character strengths can be learned, practiced, and cultivated (VIA Institute on Character, 2019c).
- Character strengths can help inform and shape the college essay.

As a part of this introduction to character strengths, before administering the VIA Survey, the advisor and the student will review the list of 24 strengths. Students will be asked to choose five they believe to represent their top strengths. In the five years I have been using the VIA

Survey, I have never had a student correctly identify all five of their signature strengths as revealed by the survey. This discrepancy not only confirms the need for the test to determine authentic signature strengths, but also the general lack of self-knowledge possessed by most of us, especially young people (Vazire & Carlson, 2010). Students commonly marvel at the differences and proceed with heightened engagement after noting them.

To help explain character strengths and virtues, advisors will be asked to tell personal stories, a practice that has been demonstrated to be a powerful means for spurring reflection and insights (Jones, Destin, & McAdams, 2018; Taylor, Jouriles, Brown, Goforth, & Banyard, 2016). Personal stories also model vulnerability and openness which can lead to a better student-advisor relationship and increase the student's comfort with self-reflection (Brown, 2010; Huddy, 2015). For example, I sometimes tell a story about a time I worked in accounting. My job required that I work alone for the better part of each day, every day. I was smart and conscientious enough to get the job done and received glowing reviews. However, I was miserable. The job sapped my energy. As someone with the signature strengths of curiosity and love of learning, the accounting job was too routine. Contrast that to my later employment in sales where I was meeting new people, constantly learning to overcome challenges, and using my signature strength of curiosity to understand a customer's perspective and needs. In sales I was not just good, I soared, and I was happy. I use this story to make the point that *the way you are is a great way to be*. Being one's authentic self is easier and can lead to well-being and enhanced life satisfaction (Schlegel, Hicks, King, & Arndt, 2011). When students understand how character strengths can help them discover their authentic self, and contribute to well-being, they become intrinsically motivated to learn more about how character strengths can be applied to their own lives, enhancing their potential for future success in college and beyond (Liang et al., 2017).

After introducing the concept of character strengths to a student, the next step in the process (Intervention #2) is to take the VIA Survey. The VIA Survey for Youth available for free at viacharacter.org, is a shorter version of the VIA Character Strengths Survey that was created specifically for 10 to 17-year-olds (McGrath & Walker, 2016). The primary difference between the VIA Survey and the VIA Survey for Youth, both of which have been validated in large scale studies, is length (McGrath & Walker). The VIA Survey for Youth contains 96 questions, versus 120 for the standard VIA Survey. When dealing with a mature 17-year-old, advisors may make a judgment call to use the adult version (personal communication Ryan Niemiec, February 8, 2019, June 14, 2019).

The VIA Survey for Youth takes approximately 10 to 15 minutes to administer, which students can do on their own at a convenient time. Students generally enjoy taking the VIA Survey (Seligman et al., 2005). The output of the survey is a report that ranks character strengths from one to 24, includes definitions, and is a good starting place for introducing strengths to advisees (See Appendix B for a sample report). Signature strengths, those ranked in the top five to seven, are an ideal place to begin as this launches the conversation in a positive direction (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Lyubchik, 2016; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Schutte & Malouff, 2018). A focus on strengths also helps to combat the tendency of some students to focus on the bottom of the list, which they incorrectly interpret as weaknesses (Baumeister et al., 2001). Advisors will head off this misconception by explaining that attributes lower on the list are still strengths; they are just expressed less frequently.

Advisors will then ask students their understanding of a particular strength. For example, they might be asked, “What is prudence?” One of my students thought prudence was associated with being a prude. To the contrary prudence is about carefulness or avoiding risk (Niemiec,

2018). Asking questions helps to reveal misinterpretation and confirms understanding. As a tool, depending on the preferred style of the advisor and the learning style of the student, the advisor may wish to use VIA Cards, a deck that includes a card for each strength with definitions and suggested activities (available from the Langley Group at <https://langleygroup.com.au/product/via-strengths-cards/>). Reviewing the character strength definitions, checking for understanding, and making sure each student understands the meaning of each are important before moving forward.

Once a student understands their signature strengths, the advisor will help students capture insights into their use of strengths. To assist students in gaining familiarity with their strengths, the advisor will provide verbal prompts:

- Do you agree with the results? Why? Why not?
- How do you feel about your signature strengths?
- Are the results what you expected?
- Were you surprised by the ranking?
- Are your signature strengths easy for you to use?
- Do you enjoy using your signature strengths?
- When you use your signature strengths, do you feel energized?
- Can you think of examples of times when you used these strengths?

As stated earlier students easily recount stories that demonstrate their use of signature strengths, but if a student has difficulty recalling specific examples, the advisor will be encouraged to tell a story (Salisu & Ransom, 2014). For example, a student who has the signature strength of “kindness” may make a practice of writing complimentary and

congratulatory notes, as one of my students did. Stories help a student to think about their way of being in the world and observe their own actions in the context of strength usage.

After this first strengths discussion, I assign the third intervention, the *Using Your Character Strength in a New Way for a Week* for homework (Appendices C and D) (Niemiec, 2018). Providing examples of new ways to use strengths can help students get started on applying and understanding character strengths. The advisor will work with the student to create a written plan, making sure that the student understands the plan is tentative and not binding, so that they are free to make changes to the plan. Students may revise the planned activities as long as they use a signature strength in a new way each day. Again, depending on student preferences, the advisor may encourage the student to use a notebook, journal, or positive portfolio to record examples of strength use, and ask the student to bring it to their next meeting. Below is an example of a one-week plan for *Using Your Signature Strengths in a New Way for a Week* from a recent student of mine with the signature strengths of curiosity, zest, love, social intelligence, and teamwork:

Day 1. Set aside time to discover a new interest to pursue this summer. (curiosity)

Day 2. While running a dreaded 5K with my sister I will think about three novel features of the activity. (curiosity)

Day 3. I will reconnect with one of my friends that I have not spoken to since moving. (zest)

Day 4. I will reflect on those I love and all the reasons why. (love)

Day 5. I will take care with the words I speak. (social intelligence)

Day 6. I will invite friends over and together we will plan a fun day. (teamwork)

Day 7. I will savor, celebrate, and make a list of what is good in my life. (zest)

As an option, the use of some kind of tangible take-away can serve as a positive reminder for students to be aware of and use their strengths. For example, I leave the students with a bookmark that has space to list signature strengths on one side, and a list of all 24 strengths grouped by virtue on the other side (see Appendix I for sample). In some cases the bookmark prompts discussions with family and friends and helps the student recall stories that validate signature strengths.

At the next meeting, the advisor will debrief the activity by engaging the student in conversation:

- Are your signature strengths easy for you to use?
- Do you enjoy using them?
- When you use your signature strengths do you feel energized?
- Did anything surprise you?
- Any other observations? Insights?

Be who you are (explore). The assignment above provides an excellent on ramp for the next character strength phase, exploration.

Once the student is aware of their character strengths, the advisor will have them complete intervention four, *Strengths-spotting in Friends and Family* (see Appendix E; Niemiec, 2018). Practicing spotting of strengths increases a student's fluency and deepens their understanding of character strengths. Furthermore, the knowledge and use of character strengths is known to enhance connections to friends, family, and those around us (Fowers, 2005).

To introduce strengths-spotting, advisors should model the intervention with each student at every visit (Niemiec, 2018). For example, the advisor might say, "Wow, I am so proud of you for completing Calculus AB. You resisted your initial temptation to drop the class, sought a

tutor, and mastered the curriculum. You clearly demonstrated your strength of persistence.”

Notice how the strength (persistence) was named, and a concrete example given (completing Calculus AB). Next, the advisor will have the student try to identify a strength in a friend or family member that they observed recently and say how the strength was exemplified. Then the advisor will ask the student to identify strengths in their interactions throughout the week.

Students will be encouraged to keep a record of how they show their strengths and to practice strengths-spotting in themselves. This intervention is useful for developing competency with all character strengths (Linkins et al., 2015). Again, the advisor will debrief the intervention using verbal prompts:

- What strengths did you spot?
- What was the reaction when you shared your observations with others?
- What did you think of the activity?
- What did you learn?

As detailed earlier, some students have difficulty identifying and naming strengths. For such students it can be useful to strengths-spot in movies or books. Numerous movie characters can be used to exemplify each of the 24 strengths (Niemiec & Wedding, 2014). Advisors will start by asking a teen to list their favorite movie or book and then identify the main character’s strengths, with a rationale for the named strength. Students could also choose someone they know and admire, for example, a relative, coach, teacher, religious advisor, or a famous figure, and discuss the obvious strengths the person embodies. This activity can assist a student in developing a strengths-spotting lens. For example, Rosa Parks exemplified courage when she refused to relinquish her seat when ordered to by a bus driver in Montgomery, Alabama.

Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Einstein, and Steve Jobs exemplify creativity. Author J. K. Rowling’s

character strength of persistence—writing though jobless, and living off welfare—allowed her to complete *Harry Potter*, which was rejected by 12 publishers before one finally accepted her book (Today Show, 2017). Identifying the character strengths of fictional and historical figures can help students increase fluency, familiarity, and competence in character strengths.

After the student gains familiarity in strengths-spotting in others, the advisor will have the student complete intervention five, *Strengths-Spotting in Self* (Niemiec, 2018). Often students require encouragement to proceed with this intervention as some perceive the practice as bragging. The advisor can help the student by coaching them that they are being factual, not boastful. Tying the practice back to the college essay also can help reinforce the value of the intervention.

Live who you are (apply). The next step in this model—Live Who You Are—involves helping the student make connections between their past and current behavior and future experiences as well as inspiring content that will help them tell stories on their applications.

The college essay is about who students are and what they envision for their future. The essay is the most obvious opportunity to utilize character strengths. After the previous interventions, students should be primed for the following activities, which can potentially become the inspiration for their essay (NACAC, 2018c).

Advisors will deploy intervention six, *You at Your Best*, to look retrospectively at a time the student shined (see Appendix F; Niemiec, 2018). Besides its utility for devising an essay topic, this intervention has been associated with increased health, well-being, positive affect, and optimism (Boselie, Vancleef, Smeets, & Peters, 2014; Geschwind, Meulders, Peters, Vlaeyen, & Meulders, 2015; Layous, Nelson, & Lyubomirsky, 2013; Loveday et al., 2018; Lyubomirsky, Dickerhoof, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Maddalena, Saxey-Reese, & Barnes, 2014; Peters, Vieler,

& Lautenbacher, 2016; Renner, Schwarz, Peters, & Huibers, 2014). After completing the *You at Your Best* story, students will write a “warm up” essay, as intervention seven, imagining their *Future Self at Their Best*, which has been shown to increase optimism and positive affect (see Appendix G; Hill, Terrell, Arellano, Schuetz, & Nagoshi, 2015; King, 2001; Peters, Flink, & Linton, 2010).

After this, students will be ready to brainstorm essay topics. A word about the standard prompts that colleges provide—I usually advise against sticking to them. The purpose of the essay is to reveal what colleges want to know (or should know) that will not be found elsewhere on the application. Published prompts often are too limiting. The essay is an ideal vehicle for demonstrating character strengths and soft skills. Students will be advised to *show* rather than *tell* about one or more strengths. Having completed the previous interventions, students will be well armed with an abundance of ideas, and hopefully they will be feeling more positive about their capability to write it.

Students frequently comment that they have nothing to write about. The truth is that strong essays can be about anything. Stories can take place at home, school, work, during an activity—just about any setting. I have seen students write exceptional essays featuring topics as mundane as receiving a parking ticket or a trip to the grocery store. Advisors can help students get unstuck by using questions related to signature strengths to support students as they brainstorm narrative ideas:

- Can you identify a problem or challenge that you overcame and describe how your strengths aided your success?
- Is there a time you made a situation better? How were your strengths reflected in your actions?

- Describe a recent “good day.” Can you identify your signature strength use that contributed to the positive experience?
- Reflect on how you have used your strengths to contribute to the well-being of others.

Proposed Study

The proposed study addresses a slice of the suggested character strength interventions and process outlined above. Due to the complexity of variables, which include variations in advisor approaches, it is prudent to tackle the first intervention before proceeding with full-scale study, and potentially, longitudinal studies.

Title. Does Self-Knowledge of Character Strengths Ease the College Essay and Application Process?

Rationale and purpose of the research. Applying to college is fraught with anxiety and stress, and the experience is generally seen as negative one. Little research has been done on the effectiveness of character strengths interventions to improve the college application process. However, college students who participated in strengths-based career counseling are happier with their experience than those advised in a traditional manner (Howell, 2010; Kosine et al., 2008; Littman-Ovadia et al., 2014; Schreiner, 2000; Schreiner & Anderson, 2005). Furthermore, character strength interventions have demonstrated increased well-being and reduced stress in a variety of settings including schools, universities, and organizations (Schutte & Malouff, 2018). Empirical evidence is necessary in order to spur the profession to employ character strengths and move the goal from admittance to *best (most prestigious) university* to *best-fit university*.” This study seeks to address whether self-knowledge of character strengths via a brief character strength intervention can increase students’ positive attitudes toward the college admissions

process and as a result enhance student well-being. As one component, it will test self-awareness of character strengths before taking the VIA Character Survey. Essays will be evaluated by admissions professionals, using a common rubric, to see if self-knowledge of authentic character strengths, based on access to VIA results, improves the quality of college essays compared to essays that are prepared without the advantage of the insights from the VIA.

Research procedures. Three groups of students (minimum of 12, maximum of 25 in each group) will be asked to respond to a Likert-scaled questions about the perceptions of the college essay and application process (pre-intervention).

- Group 1 will be asked to list their top ten strengths choosing from a list of the 24 VIA character strengths. The students will then take the VIA and receive their top five character strengths (i.e., signature strengths; McGrath, & Walker, 2016).
- Group 2 will be asked to list their top five strengths from a list of the 24 VIA character strengths.
- A third group will have no strength intervention (active placebo).
- All three groups will take the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being (Kern, Benson, Steinberg, & Steinberg, 2016). Additionally, they will respond to questions indicating their attitudes toward the college essay and application process using a validated measurement tool.
- All three groups will receive instruction on writing a college essay using their identified strengths (in separate classrooms, at the same time of day, delivered by experienced college advisors using the same lesson plan for which they have received identical training).

- Post-tests (EPOCH and questions about attitude toward the college essay and admission process) will be administered to all three groups to see if their attitude toward the college admission process has changed and to assess well-being.
- Group 2 and 3 will act as waitlists and receive the VIA after the study.
- Data will be analyzed to determine student accuracy in predicting their signature strengths.
- After students draft their essays, the results will be evaluated by two trained admissions professions using a SAT or ACT type grading matrix, and scores will be averaged individually and within the group. Academic Records may be used to correlate with essay scores.
- An optional focus group will provide qualitative data and feedback
- My hypothesis is that the group given the VIA character strengths test will feel more positive about essay development and the college process as demonstrated by the post-tests, and essays from this group will be stronger. Furthermore, the study will demonstrate that students are not accurate in determining their signature strengths.

Subjects. High school juniors who plan on applying to at least one four-year college or university.

Location. The intervention will be administered in three high school classrooms after school. Students will be asked to return in one week to review their essays.

Subject recruitment. Students at the same high school (to control for socioeconomic status) will be offered an after-school class in college essay writing with the understanding that

they will also be participating in a study. An opt-out notice will be sent to parents and appear on the school website and newsletter.

Risks to subjects. Some students may be unhappy with the top strengths, although this is expected to be unlikely. Another possibility is that some students may experience increased stress simply by participating in an elongated essay development process. The outlined process is designed specifically to diminish anxiety, so this result is also seen as unlikely.

Benefits to subjects. Subjects will receive information on character strengths and the college essay writing which might otherwise be unavailable to them at a convenient time.

Conclusion

My son Michael's less than successful college application experience inspired me to search for ways to decrease the stress and increase the success of the college application process. As recounted earlier, Michael did not gain admission to a *best fit* university. Later, after he graduated, Michael decided he did not want to work in the business world and spent two years waiting tables while trying to discern his path forward. After completing a master's in music therapy, he is now flourishing as a musician, music teacher, and neurologic music therapist. Character strengths and interventions helped propel Michael to well-being and a better life.

The college application process is fraught with anxiety and uncertainty. Besides being a largely negative experience, the application process misses a significant opportunity to help students understand their character strengths and position them for greater happiness and success based on that understanding. While character strengths are well documented in terms of their effect on well-being in a variety of settings, more research is needed to validate the impact of interventions that support self-understanding and help students to develop skills that contribute to their well-being, even as they undertake the college application process. With such

interventions, an enriched college application process has the potential to benefit students in college and beyond. Character strengths have great potential to help students recognize their authentic selves, to thrive in college, and to know that *the way they are is a great way to be*.

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Appendix A



Figure 1. Word Cloud Depicting Adjective to Describe the College Application Process. The word cloud appearing above was created from the responses of twenty students and their parents to the request: “Please list five adjectives that you feel honestly describe the college application process.” Adjectives in red are perceived as negative, blue as positive, and purple as neutral. If there was a question as to whether an adjective was negative, positive, or neutral, the participant was asked for clarification. Responses were four times as likely to be negative as opposed to positive or neutral, despite the fact that the students in this cohort has all gained admittance to at least one of their preferred colleges and received significant support throughout the process. Eight-six unique descriptors were provided. The most frequent responses in descending order were stressful, long, anxiety (or anxiety producing), exciting, and daunting.

Appendix B

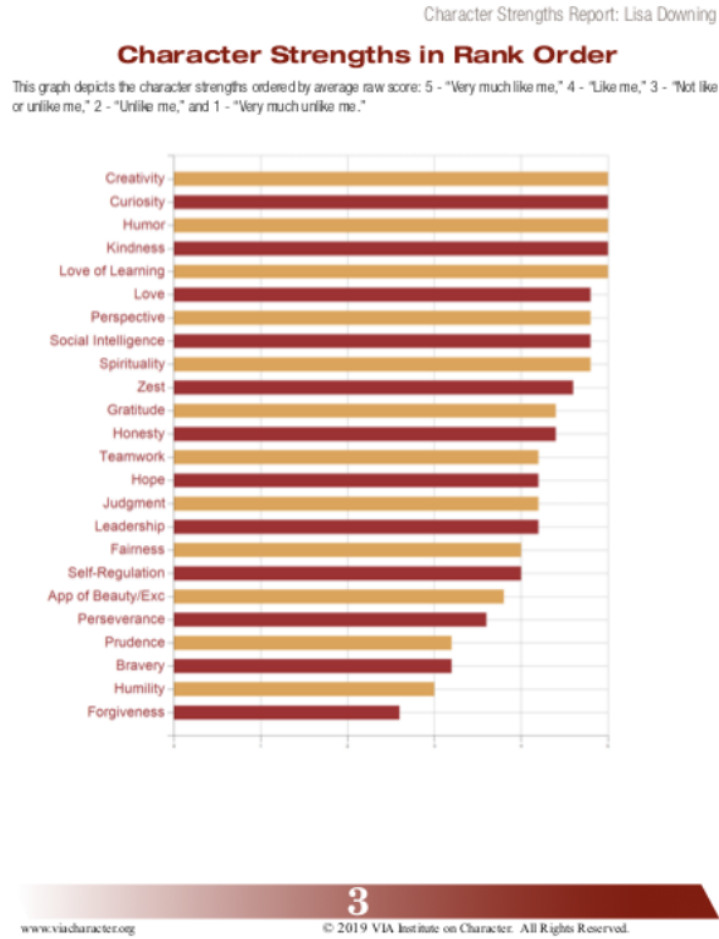


Figure 2. Sample VIA Character-Strengths Report. Sample character strength report to show a sample of the results from the VIA Character Survey. Page generated from character strength survey <https://www.viacharacter.org/resources/videos/the-science-of-character>

Appendix C

Steps for Using Character Strengths in College Admissions Advising

What follows is an example of a step by step process I have used with students applying to college. However, I always adapt the steps, depending on the needs of the student and the particulars of each unique situation. It is important to follow the lead of the student and use the interventions appropriately for the benefit of the student.

1. College advisor takes VIA and identifies their signature strengths.
2. College advisor experiments with suggested interventions.
3. College advisor introduces the concept of character strengths to student(s) perhaps using the video *The Science of Character Strengths/VIA* <http://www.viacharacter.org/www/Character-Strengths-Old/The-Science-of-Character-Video>
4. Student takes the youth or adult VIA, depending upon maturity.
5. College advisor tells stories about character strengths to build rapport, model behavior, and show vulnerability using examples from one's own high school/college application process.
6. College advisor checks for understanding and helps the student gain insight into strengths suggest use of strength cards (see Appendix I) or some visual aid.
7. Suggest the use of a journal, positive portfolio, or notebook to keep track of insights.
8. Give the student a take away with list of signature strengths (see Appendix I).
9. College advisor assigns the intervention *Using Signature Strengths in a New Way* (see Appendix D).
10. Debrief *Using Signature Strengths in a New Way*
11. College advisor and student discuss strengths-spotting

12. College advisor assigns *Strengths-Spotting in Friends and Family* (see Appendix E; Niemiec, 2018). Alternative activities include asking the student for their favorite movie and identify strengths of the main characters. Or, ask the student who they admire and identify the strengths of that person.
13. Debrief *Strength-Spotting in Friends and Family* (Niemiec, 2018).
14. College advisor assigns *Strength-Spotting in Self* (see Appendix E; Niemiec, 2018).
15. Debrief *Strengths-Spotting in Self*.
16. Assign the intervention *You at Your Best* (see Appendix F; Niemiec, 2018).
17. Debrief *You at Your Best*.
18. Assign *You at Your Best in the Future* (see Appendix G).
19. Debrief *You at Your Best in the Future*.
20. Write the essay and using insights gained from the character strengths interventions.

Appendix D

Intervention: Using your Signature Strengths in a New Way

Using Signature Strengths in a New Way is an intervention aimed at taking existing character strengths and applying them in new ways in varying situations and domains (e.g., at school, with friends, with family). Research has found using this intervention boosts happiness and decreases depression with effects lasting up to six months. Below are examples of how this intervention might be applied using each of the 24 universal character strengths. After taking the VIA survey and identifying top character strengths, consider using one of the following ideas, or coming up with your own, to use signature strengths in new ways. With the student, write out a one-week plan with a specific idea for using strengths in a new way.

Suggestions for using signature strengths in a new way for high school students applying to college:

Appreciation of beauty and excellence

- Take a hike and admire the view.
- Visit a museum and admire the artwork.
- Change your room to be more to your liking. Peruse Pinterest for ideas.
- Put together a scrapbook of pictures, sayings, stories or anything that inspires you.
- When you visit college campuses and towns, make a list of spaces and places that appeal to your sense of beauty and excellence.

Bravery

- Be the first to answer a question in class.
- Take an unpopular stand if you believe it to be justified.
- Run for a class office or audition for a school performance.
- When on a college tour, ask questions of the tour guide and students you encounter.

Creativity

- Try a new activity, join a new club.
- Use your creative skills to create a surprise for a friend or family member—e.g., paint picture, use a new recipe to prepare a new dish, write a poem or a nice letter.
- Consider an issue or problem you are facing and find a creative solution.
- Re-organize your room to be more to your liking or increase your productivity.
- Keep a journal of new and novel ideas.

- Next time you think you need to buy something, survey your living space to find something that will suffice; fill the need by using something unique and/or in a different way.

Curiosity

- Be the first to raise your hand in class and ask a question.
- At dinner, or other event, ask about someone's day and ask specific follow-up questions.
- Sign up for a new class, club or event—something you have never tried before.
- Introduce yourself to someone new at school.
- Review a list of new college majors and careers.
- Stay after class and ask your teacher a novel question on the class topic.
- When touring colleges, ask to sit in on classes or meet with professors in discipline of interest. Prepare questions in advance.
- In college information sessions and tours ask questions of the presenters and tour guides.

Fairness

- Try to see another side of a controversial situation.
- Speak up when someone is criticized offering another possible reason for the behavior.
- When working in a team or group, try to make sure everyone is treated equally.
- For an issue you feel strongly about, read articles supporting the opposing view.

Forgiveness

- Think of reasons to forgive someone who wronged you. Try to let go of the hurt.
- Write a letter of forgiveness to someone who has hurt you. You do not need to send.

Gratitude

- Write a thank-you note to someone you haven't thanked.
- Start or end each day with a list of three things you are thankful for (written or mental).
- Keep a journal of what you are thankful for.

Honesty

- For a day, go out of your way to give positive honest feedback to those you encounter.
- Evaluate your inner self-critic.

Humor

- Tell a funny story to a friend or family member.
- Watch a comedy and relate the story to a friend.
- Read the comics.
- Visit the library and check out comedic books.

Hope

- Compose, via words or pictures, what you imagine for your future.
- Journal your hopes for your college experience. Try to be as specific as possible.

Humility

- When working in a team or group, notice who is doing most of the talking. Ask someone who isn't speaking up for their opinion.
- The next time someone says something that you disagree with, stay quiet. Notice the dynamics.
- When you receive good news, an award, or recognition, resist the temptation to share the news with your friends and family. Let them discover the news organically.
- Accept compliments with humility.
- Read the Autobiography of Ben Franklin (who struggled with humility).

Judgment

- Read an article that supports an opinion other than yours and try to understand the reasoning.
- Join a speech and debate club and make a point of supporting an opinion different from your own.
- Think about a time when you were sure you were correct, and changed your mind. What prevented you from seeing the other perspective?
- Learn about choice architecture by reading a Thinking Fast and Slow (Kahneman, 2015) and learning what prevents us from making the best decision: anchoring, maximizing, past experiences, social comparison, cognitive biases, etc.
- Think about an ongoing argument with your parents or friends. Can you see their perspective?

Kindness

- Write anonymous kind notes on Post-its and leave them where friends can find them.
- Offer to tutor a friend in a difficult subject. Befriend someone who seems to be having a difficult day.
- Leave inspiring notes anonymously on parked cars.
- When interacting with clerks or salespeople, smile and seek to brighten their day.

Love

- Invest in a relationship you value.
- Write an affirming letter to someone you care about.

Love of learning

- Make a list of subjects you are interesting learning more about.
- Visit the library and check-out a book(s) on a new subject.
- Explore EdX online classes and sign up for one that is of interest.
- Explore podcasts and listen to one of interest.
- Ask friends and family about their favorite academic subjects and why they enjoy them.
- Watch YouTube videos on a new topic of interest.
- Look through a college course catalogue for majors of interest. Explore the majors.
- Read the student newspaper of colleges that you are interested in.

Leadership

- If not already involved, consider joining an organization such as the Boy, Girl or Venture Scouts.
- Run for a class, club, or activity office.
- Take a leadership role in a club, team, or organization you belong to.
- Start a new club and invite classmates to join.
- Offer to organize a family outing or trip.

Perseverance

- Think of a new beneficial habit you would like to create. Make a schedule to stick to it. For example, strive for 8-9 hours of sleep per night, meditate daily, or perform some kind of physical activity daily.
- Finish a project early, allowing you time to perfect or polish it.
- Write a daily or weekly “to do” list and strive to accomplish all items.

Perspective

- Offer help to a friend who is struggling with a difficult decision.
- What is some of the best advice you have received? The worst? Why?
- What is a recent good decision you made? What made it a good decision? What process did you go through to make the decision?
- Is there a decision you made that did not turn out as your planned? What did you learn?
- Is there something you could have done differently?
- Is there someone you admire? Why?

Prudence

- Plan a special event for a friend or family member
- For rising seniors, plan a calendar for completing your college applications by Thanksgiving.
- For rising juniors who plan on taking the SAT, ACT or, subject tests, plan a calendar for testing preparation and practice.
- For all high school students, plan your summer to include at least one academic activity and another activity of interest; each activity should entail 100 or more hours. Make a detailed plan.

Self-regulation

- Download and try the Focus Keeper app that automatically sets a timer after 25 minutes of work, and another after a five-minute break.
- Eliminate social media for a week. What changes do you notice?
- Commit to 8 hours of sleep on a regular schedule.
- Write a list of daily “to do” items, and complete each.
- The next time someone says something that upsets you avoid the tendency to snap back.

Social intelligence

- For a day, strive to make your interactions with individuals the highlight of their day.
- The next time you enter a group situation, observe the dynamics.

- Think about the motivations of others. When you think you understand, ask directly and see if your observations are accurate.

Spirituality

- Try and make a habit of meditation daily.
- Read books by the great thinkers (e.g., Aristotle, Confucius, the Buddha) and contemplate their ideas.
- Explore EdX for spirituality classes and audit one.
- Attend an event or class about a religious/spiritual practice.

Teamwork

- Help a friend with a struggle.
- Get a group of friends together and organize a fundraiser.
- Set a goal and recruit a friend with a similar goal. Keep each other on track.

Zest

- Attend a competitive event and cheer for your team.
- Plan a celebration for a friend's accomplishment.
- Make sure to engage in something you enjoy daily.
- Take care of yourself. Eat right, get enough sleep, exercise, and meditate.
- Spend time with other enthusiastic people.

Note: Original content inspired from the blog post *New Ways to Happiness with Strengths*, April

20, 2012 by Dr. Ryan Niemiec. Retrieved from

<http://www.viacharacter.org/blog/author/kellyaviacharacter-org/>

Appendix E

Intervention: Strength-Spotting in Friends, Family, and Self

The purpose of this intervention is to help the student gain an appreciation and understanding of both individual strengths, and the strengths of others (Niemiec, 2018). It also serves to build connections and enhance relationships. Additionally, the student will start to develop fluency in the language of character strengths.

People find that it is easier to spot strengths in others, as opposed to themselves; it is recommended that student begin with strengths-spotting in others. As such, by spotting strengths in others, students will become more proficient in spotting strengths in themselves.

Think of your family. For each, name a character strength that they exemplify. What actions does the family member take that give clues to their character strengths? For example, perhaps one demonstrates kindness by consistently offering to help with chores. Or, another is always asking questions at the dinner table using their character strength of curiosity. For the next week, strengths-spot daily, and keep a record of the strengths you spot and how you identified the strength. Attempt to acknowledge the strengths spotted. For example, you may say, "I always see you with a new book to read. You have a tremendous love of learning."

The following suggestion can assist with strengths-spotting:

Build a language. It important that students understand the language of character strengths (e.g., the definitions, the vocabulary, etc.). This will help them better appreciate what character strengths are, how they are used, and how to incorporate them into their daily lives. In order become more conversant with character strengths, the advisor should have a printed overview of the 24-character strengths and their definitions from <http://www.viacharacter.org/>
[www/Character-Strengths](http://www.viacharacter.org/)

Encourage the student to look for verbal and non-verbal cues. What do strengths look like in action? The idea is to look for a shift in energy, a change in look—both verbal and a nonverbal cues (e.g., look for improved posture, better eye contact, eyes “lighting up,” more smiling or laughing, increased use of hand gestures, and the expression of positive emotions such as joy, excitement, or hope). On a *verbal* level, listen for a stronger, more assertive voice, increased speed of speech, improved vocabulary, clarity of speech, and use of strength words. Some people might be quicker and even tangential in their speech because they are excited about the topic while others speak more slowly and are more methodical in their delivery.

Label and explain character strength behaviors. First, identify the specific strength or strengths that you spot (e.g., curiosity). Second, share the fact that you identified the strength and why. For example, “I noticed that you ask a lot of good questions. I see that curiosity is a strength of yours.” Third, if appropriate, express to your appreciation for the person’s strength. For example, “Thank you for asking such great questions and being so curious and inquisitive.”

Build a habit by maintaining strengths-spotting. Repeat the above phrases through practice and more practice. Like developing any skill, it requires habitual and proficient practice. To help develop the skills involved in recognizing character strengths, encourage the student to keep a log (mental or written) of what behavioral expressions corresponded with particular character strengths in friend and family members.

Strengths-spotting in self. Strengths-spotting in oneself can be more difficult than identifying strengths in others. However, with practice students will begin to notice their strength use and act in accordance with their authentic self. As a tip, ask the student to decide on a signature strength to focus on, and make note of how they used the strength throughout the day. Where and when did they use the strength? Was it easy to use? Difficult? How did they feel? In

addition to expanding one's familiarity and fluency with character strengths, journaling these observations can also help contribute to stories used in college essays.

Appendix F

Intervention: You at Your Best

The purpose of this intervention is to contribute to, and increase, a college-searching student's positive affect and optimism, energize the student's application process, and most immediately, inspire content for the development of the college essay. In this intervention, advisors invite students to look retrospectively at their experiences and tell about one during which they were at their best.

Establishing a psychologically safe environment is important to this exercise. Students may already meet with advisors in a familiar situation, such as a kitchen table in their home. If the setting is comfortable, relatively quiet, and conducive to privacy (or at least to working with limited interruptions), the usual meeting location is optimal. If the usual meeting place is somewhere public, such as a coffee house, it may be best to choose an alternative location that meets selection criteria. If at all possible, this intervention should take place in person rather than by telephone so that the advisor may gauge facial expressions and body language.

The advisor will begin by explaining the general purpose of the exercise and put the student at ease. Acknowledge that students may feel awkward writing about their best self. Tell the student that talking about something good they did is not bragging; it is a concrete, factual description of something that really happened. Some of the best stories are not about grand achievements or perfect performances. Although the resulting story can be drawn from the span of a student's lifetime, it can be just as helpful to identify something that happened, when they were at their best, in the past week. Then the advisor will offer the following instructions, adjusting the wording to his or her style:

Tell a story about an event or time when you were at your best. This could be from the distant past or a moment in the past week. Don't worry about whether your words are exactly right. Just tell what you did, and what happened. The event can be a challenge you overcame, or something you did to make a negative situation better. Perhaps you did the right thing when it would have been easier not to, or stood up for something when it wasn't popular. Maybe you reached out to someone who was isolated, or helped another student who was struggling. It doesn't matter if anyone else noticed or said thank you. Maybe it was just a little moment you felt good about. What made this a good moment? Try to remember how you felt. As you go, try to identify one or more character strength that you expressed.

If the student struggles, it is sometimes necessary to ask a series of questions to help the student dig deeper and be more insightful. Questions can help the student capture their ideas:

What character strength helped in that situation?

What was your motivation?

Was the situation difficult, unusual, or typical?

What did you learn?

How did you feel?

By the end of the meeting the student should have an outline of a story, or stories showcasing them at their best. Ask the student to complete a draft of the story for homework.

Appendix G

Intervention: You at Your Future Best

The purpose of this intervention is to contribute to, and increase, a college-searching student's positive affect and optimism, energize the student's application process, and help the student start to concretely identify their hopes and dreams. From there, the student, along with the college advisor can begin to identify potential goals, plans, and paths to make the desired future a reality. The exercise helps the student move from a fuzzy vision of the future to consideration of real possibilities. In this intervention, advisors invite students to look prospectively at their future.

Establishing a psychologically safe environment is important to this exercise. Students may already meet with advisors in a familiar situation, such as a kitchen table in their home. If the setting is comfortable, relatively quiet, and conducive to privacy (or at least to working with limited interruptions), the usual meeting location is optimal. If the usual meeting place is somewhere public, such as a coffee house, it may be best to choose an alternative location that meets selection criteria. If at all possible, this intervention should take place in person rather than by telephone so that the advisor may gauge facial expressions and body language.

The advisor will begin by explaining the general purpose of the exercise and put the student at ease.

Imagine that everything has gone well. You have worked hard and achieved your goals. Now, write about this best possible future and describe their dreams in concrete terms. For example, what are you studying? What is your living situation? You have graduated from college. What is your next step? Graduate school? Work? What kind of job have you secured? How do you spend your free time?

If the student struggles, it is sometimes necessary to ask a series of questions to help the student dig deeper and be more insightful. This exercise is designed to look both at the college years and post-graduation. Additional questions can help the student capture their ideas:

- What is would you most like to study? What interests you?
- If I gave you the resources to spend a year learning about anything that intrigues you, how would you spend that year?
- Where do you study for your classes? The library? A coffee shop? The student union?
- Imagine what your ideal college looks like. Is it rural, or perhaps in the center of large city? Near water?
- Imagine you have graduated and secured your dream job. Where are you working? A large office? Outside? In an artist's studio? A hospital? An office? Do you travel? Sit at a desk? Do you work alone or in a team? Do you manage people? What is your work schedule?
- How do you spend your work day?
- Where are you living? In a city? An apartment? With friends?
- How do you spend your free time? Volunteering? What hobbies and interests do you have?

Once the vision is complete, a plan can be developed to help the student achieve their goals.

Next, ask the student how their character strengths can contribute to achieving this desired future. For example, in an academic setting, perhaps one's perseverance can help them through a particularly difficult class. Utilizing the strength of forgiveness can be helpful in moving on after a disappointing grade on a test. Perhaps one's prudence will help them manage

their finances so that they can graduate from college without debt. Curiosity can assist a student in asking thoughtful questions during office hours. Using the character strength of bravery, a student can break the silence and ask the first question in class. Help the student determine what character strengths will help make their dream a reality. Doing so can increase a student's sense of agency and optimism.

Appendix H

Character Strengths Presentation for College Advisors

Pre-workshop: College advisors take the VIA Character Strength Survey at

<https://www.viacharacter.org/www/Character-Strengths-Survey> and bring the results to the presentation. Advisors will write a brief paragraph describing *You at Your Best*.

Purpose of Workshop: To educate College Admissions Advisors on the value of Character Strengths in easing the college application process

Format and Topics Included: The presentation will include a brief background in positive psychology, the science behind character strengths, signature strengths of individuals, and methods for using character strengths in college advising. Note that because this is a social science, the data is suggestive. The value comes in the reflection and exploration of the data both individually and as a group, therefore sample activities will be included. It is recommended that a college advisor with character strengths lead the presentation.

Time Requirements: 30 minutes of individual preparation and one hour as a group

Location: A large conference room, preferably with a U-shaped seating format

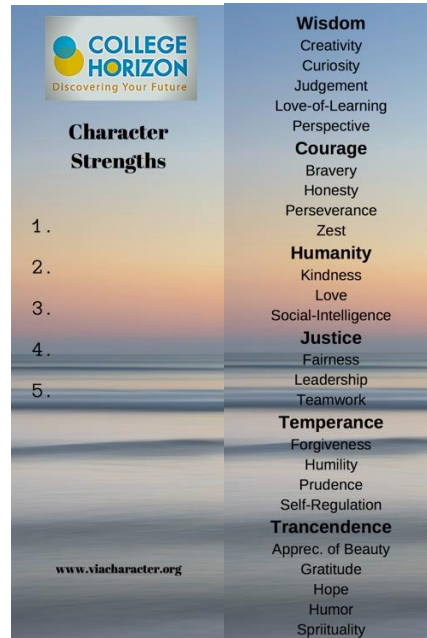
Materials Needed: Writing materials such as flip charts, colored markers, sticky notepads; projector to display instructive presentation.

Presentation: For a 49 slide presentation, an introduction to character strengths and their use in the college application process for college advising professionals please contact the author.

Appendix I

Suggested Resources

1. A sample bookmark, used as a takeaway, to remind students of their signature strengths, including a list of all 24 character strengths (useful for strengths-spotting) and the link to the VIA Institute on Character.



2. Strength based cards available from the Langley Institute:
<https://langleygroup.com.au/product/via-strengths-cards/>
3. Resources available through the VIA Character Organization include research papers, and information on workshops and personal coaching:
<https://www.viacharacter.org/resources>