A Strength Based Approach to Advising and Coaching First Generation Students Navigating a Plan "B"

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Overview of presentation

• What I’ll be talking about
• Overview of First Generation students
• The Strength Based Approach
• Activities (2)
• Take aways for your personal toolbox
Unfamiliar Situations Exercise 1

Take a few minutes to think to yourself about a situation where you were in a new and completely unknown environment.

Examples might be:

• You switched jobs or positions and wondered “What’s going on here?”
• Given a new task or a new technology that’s completely unfamiliar?
• Worked with people who came from different backgrounds and not really sure if you’re all on the same page?

How did you feel?

What did you do?
Unfamiliar Situations

- We know it is challenging
- We usually adjust--eventually
Research from Harvard Business Review shows:

**Build trust** and actions based on this can override the discomfort of unfamiliarity  
Clear communication, Being on time, Delivering on promises, and fulfilling obligations

**Decrease stress**: Stress makes our brain less “friendly” towards novelty – we like what we know – return to old habits  
Create an emotional connection, find commonality

“Building up structures that enhance trust, decrease stress and creating an emotional connection with people or a project can help the brain navigate its way to your goals.”

*Source Srini Pillay, Tinker, Dabble, Doodle, Try: Unlock the Power of the Unfocused Mind.*

https://hbr.org/2014/03/how-to-deal-with-unfamiliar-situations
First Generation Students

What do I mean by First Generation student?

- Did either of their parents or guardians complete a bachelor's (4 year or higher) degree at any college or university?
- If NO, then they are First Generation
First Gen students (FGEN)

Nationally

- According to an NCES report from 2018
  - a third of college students are First Generation.

- Virginia Tech
  - University wide – Spring 2020 16% FGEN
  - College of Science - Spring 2020 18% FGEN
First Generation Student Profile

- Higher rates of attrition
- More likely to come from lower socioeconomic backgrounds
- More likely to have academic difficulties
- Higher propensity of working full-time
- More likely to have family responsibilities
- May have to help financially support the family
- Less time to focus on courses
- More likely to be receiving financial aid
First Generation Student Profile

• Hence may be less engaged and committed to the full college experience
• Self-reliance for developing their career aspirations contributes to their hesitancy to utilize campus resources when encountering academic and social barriers
• Many tend to be too shy or proud to seek out help, and they are the least assertive about advocating for themselves
• Do not realize that there are sources of support on campus, including tutoring, counseling and other services and resources
Additional Challenges many FGEN Students Face

Many FGEN have lower Economic, Social and Cultural Capital

- **Economic capital**: Command of economic resources (money, assets, property).

- **Social capital**: Social capital is the value that comes from social networks, or groupings of people, which allow individuals to achieve things they couldn't on their own
  - Your neighbor jumps your car when it won't start
  - You wave to another parent when you drop off your child at school
  - Students join clubs, Panhellenic, tutoring, writing centers
    - Result in success in courses, Jobs, internships

- **Cultural capital**: A person's education (knowledge and intellectual skills) that provides advantage in achieving a higher social-status in society.
  - Education, Intellect, Style of speech, Style of dress, etc.

Duck Syndrome: How many First-Generation Students feel?
Strengths of FGEN Students

While the obstacles can be substantial, there is also cause for optimism.

**Strengths of First Generation students**

- Higher satisfaction with the college experience than their peers (Nomi, 2005).
- Students achieve *better learning gains* in writing skills, greater preference for higher order thinking tasks, and more accurate attribution for academic success.
- Resiliency--they are better than other students at overcoming setbacks as they strive to fulfill their educational aspirations (Pascarella et al., 2003).
- Career oriented.
SO...

... how can we apply this understanding of First Gen students to help us shape a Strength Based Approach to advising?
Advising – Forced Change of Major FGEN

- Students are navigating a required change in major due to:
  - Life event or unsuccessful course

- Approach: Strength Based

- Focus: What makes advising first generation students through this transition different from other students?
Advising – Forced Change of Major FGEN

The goals for advising a student navigating a major change:

- Student feels understood, supported
- Be in the Drivers Seat
- Understand and engage with career exploration resources and other university resources
- Chose a best fit major
- Develop their future academic plan
- Leave appointments feeling empowered and confident

Navigating this process can be challenging for any student . . .
Advising – Forced Change of Major FGEN

Potential additional challenges for a First-Generation student

• Identity Challenge

• Social challenge
  • Social and Cultural capital acquired

• Financial aid/AYP a big hurdle for student

• Academic challenges

• Family/community support challenges
Advising – Forced Change of Major FGEN

**Possible Concerns:**

- **Family, Community:** Pressure of being the first in the family to attend school, serving as a role model for younger siblings and in some cases continuing to help support the family.

  *Quotes from students*
  
  “It’s not only about me. I’m the first to go to college. I have to show my sister she can do it.”
  
  “My parents have scarified so much. How can I tell them I failed?”

- **Financial** - Navigating Fin Aid can be challenging for any student, but for FGEN it’s magnified. Pressure for grades to keep aid.
  
  - Worries about if they have to change majors they will not be able to support their families or pay back loans.
  
  - Full scholarships can be misleading—housing, transportation, extra semesters (FIN aid GAP)
Best advising:

The greatest impact from advising occurs when advisors are knowledgeable, accessible, and concerned, and when advising is planning-centered, goal-directed, and strengths-based.
Strength Based Advising Overview

Strengths Based advising:

• identifies and builds on students’ inherent talents

• teaches them how to develop and apply their strengths to new and challenging learning tasks
Strength Based Advising Overview

History: *Long* and *Proven* Inter-Disciplinary research

- **Social work** first (Saleebey, 1996, 2006; Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt, 1989).
  
  **Grow and overcome adversity**

- **Business Accounts** of strengths-based development (Buckingham, 2007; Clifton & Harter, 2003; Hodges & Clifton, 2004; Rath & Conchie, 2008)

  **Awareness of talent motivates people toward excellence**

- Current from *positive psychology* (Aspinwall & Staudinger, 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Shushok & Hulme, 2006)

  **Intrinsic motivation**

## Strength Based Advising Overview

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Foundation</th>
<th>becoming more aware of their strengths, students will be motivated to set goals, achieve at a higher level, make better choices, and complete the tasks they set out to achieve.</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus</td>
<td>of advising sessions shifts from <strong>problems to possibilities</strong>.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Framing</td>
<td>shifts. Rather than problem-focused questions, open-ended questions Instead of asking, “Why are you always late to class?” “Tell me how you make it to baseball practice early each day.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feelings</td>
<td>change—the student experiences more positives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confidence</td>
<td>increases</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of Direction</td>
<td>improves</td>
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Strength Based Advising Overview

Strength Based Advising

Practice – It works!

• Louis (2011) demonstrated that a strengths-development approach contributes significantly to a growth mind-set

• Cantwell (2008)- found a strength based advising greater feelings of control over one’s own academic success as well as to greater levels of engaged learning, higher grades, and enhanced satisfaction with college than a needs assessment group.

• The strengths-based advising group experienced a freshman-to-sophomore persistence rate that was 12% higher than that of a needs assessment group, a statistically significant difference.

*The strengths-development approach does not ignore weaknesses; rather students address weaknesses from a position of strength.*
The Elements of Strength Based Advising

1. Identify Students' Talents
2. Affirm Students' Talents
3. Plan Specific Steps/Goals
4. Envision the Future
5. Apply Students' Strengths to Challenges
A Strength Based Approach to Advising a forced Change of Major

- Remember that the student will be nervous
- Build trust and decrease stress
- Assure them you know it is challenging
- It is normal and you will adjust
A Strength Based Approach to Advising a forced Change of Major

Identify Students’ Talents

Assessing to discover strengths, gifts, talents, skills, abilities, aptitudes, habits, beliefs, knowledge, and curiosities that have been used or could be used for achievement.

Identify strengths

• Strength Finder
• Probing questions
Shift problems to possibilities

“What do your family and friends say they like most about you?”

“Tell me about a time in your life when you accomplished something you were proud of.”

“What courses did you learn with greatest ease in high school?”

“What do you think are specific things you have done so far in your life that got you to college?”

*Pay attention to students’ flow experiences, those times when excellence was achieved without conscious thought or to their yearnings.*
A Strength Based Approach to Advising a Forced Change of Major

The Challenge of Using the Strengths Approach With Students

Students are usually unaware of their strengths, talents, abilities, and curiosities.

Students may resist exploring their strengths for fear that they have few, if any, talents—or they may fear that if they used their talents and then failed, they wouldn’t know where to turn and would become disillusioned and discouraged.

Students may believe that overcoming weaknesses and removing deficiencies are the best methods for achieving—especially FGENs
A Strength Based Approach to Advising a Forced Change of Major

*Increase Awareness* of their strengths, talents, and abilities

*Validate* strengths that can produce success in college

"Which of your strengths do you feel you rely on most to be successful?"

**Note:** FGEN are more likely to think in purely transactional terms. Present application of strengths to academics in transactional terms.

For example:
Strength in communication → led to better grades → which led to job.
A Strength Based Approach to Advising a Forced Change of Major

**Discussing aspirations**
- which of their strengths they want to develop further
- how they plan to use their strengths to pursue their hopes and dreams during and after college
- what new areas they may want to investigate and how they might use their strengths in that process

Keeping it concrete to next semester, then to their goals in life. FGEN often don’t have the luxury of thinking about BIG dreams.

Be aware of possible FGEN Concerns – telling family, how they can use their strengths to brainstorm an approach, financial/work, etc.

Talk about benefits of transition: will build Social capital – how they've developed it in the past
“Imagine yourself graduating from college. What do you see yourself doing as a result of being a college graduate?”

“How would you describe the person you want to become? “

“ How can you use your strengths to become the person you want to be in 5 years?”
A Strength Based Approach to Advising a Forced Change of Major

Plan of action for how
- strengths can be developed further
- aspirations can be pursued

- Major and course selection becomes a more informed process
- Student selects a major and courses that are:
  - a good fit, that are compatible with their strengths, and existing knowledge and skills.
- Additional considerations for FGEN: Financial aid, work, time to degree, building on social and cultural capital acquired
- SMART Goals
- Written and tracked Action Plan!
A Strength Based Approach to Advising a Forced Change of Major

**FGEN Awareness**

Assist a FGEN student in perceiving the benefits of a particular course by explaining how it will develop the skills and knowledge to reach the students' **concrete** goals.

Assist with how to utilize tutoring as away to get both social capital and financial capital.

How to use social capital they have accumulated from old major.

Talking with professors in the new major – example from past.
Build Your Constituency

Questions to ask the student:

- Who are the people who can help you reach that goal?
- Do you know them?
- Do you need to brainstorm ways to connect?
- What support centers will you need to be successful?

The student will begin to see how to use their strengths to meet their goals.
Career Center: Invite a career person into the process – instead of a push out, a reach in.

Unfamiliar. May be overwhelming to schedule and attend.

Faculty: Leverage positive relationships they have and involve a faculty member in the student's major discovery process.

Retention research shows that connections with faculty members outside the classroom make a huge difference in whether a student drops out:

http://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/01/opinion/sunday/what-can-stop-kids-from-dropping-out.html
Incorporate and Collaborate Campus Resources with FGENs

Campus support services:

- Counseling Center – mental and emotional health
- First Gen – connections with faculty mentors
- Career Center – career and major exploring
- SOAR – URM coaching, test prep, financial
- International Center
Incorporate and Collaborate Campus Resources with FGENs

**Campus support services:**

- *Cultural and Community Center – support and mentors*
- *Services for students with disabilities*
- *Tutoring – academic, rebuilding social capital*
- *Clubs – stress relief, motivation, retention*
- *Recreation Sports – community involvement*
A Strength Based Approach to Advising a Forced Change of Major

- **SMART Goals**

- **Written and Tracked Action Plan!**

- Major and course selection becomes a more informed process

- Student selects a major and courses that are:
  - a good fit, that are compatible with their strengths, and existing knowledge and skills.

- Additional considerations for FGEN: Financial aid, work, time to degree, building on social and cultural capital acquired

*Plan of action using strengths so that aspirations are pursued*
The Elements of Strength Based Advising

1. Identify and increase students’ awareness of their talents

2. Teach the advisees ways of developing their talents into strengths

3. Further develop the competencies that will help them meet their educational and life goals.

4. Make a plan

5. Help students apply their strengths to new or challenging situations, such as the career planning process, course selection, adjustment or academic difficulties, and the typical issues that students face in completing their college careers successfully.
Case study: Sofia

Sofia is a full-time, traditional-aged 2nd year student at a large 4 year public university. Sofia identifies strongly with her Hispanic background. She attended a large urban high school where she was editor of the school paper. Sofia is the oldest child in her family, and her mother has health issues. She has a favorite high school teacher that she visits while home over school breaks. During her freshman year, when asked if she had spoken to an advisor, she stated she dreaded it and told a friend she uses her peers for advice. She has also sought advice from the head of the Hispanic and Latinx Cultural Center with whom she feels comfortable. Sofia does not have a good understanding of how the education system works, nor does she take advantage of the information systems available to her. Sofia is working 15 hours a week, and is on partial scholarship. She is very concerned about getting a degree in 4 years. She is not familiar with career services.

Sofia has just received her final notice that she will not be able to continue in Data Sciences, and must meet with an academic advisor to discuss a change of major to register for the coming semester. Sofia feels panic as she encounters this academic crisis. She fears she will not be able to get a job. She does not trust advising. She is concerned about losing her scholarship.
The Elements of Strength Based Advising

Step 1: Identify Students’ Talents

Step 2: Affirm Students’ Talents and Increase Awareness of Strengths

Step 3: Envision the Future

Step 4: Plan Specific Steps for Students to Reach Goals

Step 5: Apply Students’ Strengths to Challenges