

Chapter 7: Developing Academic Strengths in College

You have considered the importance of talents in planning your education to achieve personal strengths. Now, it is time to plot out how to build on your talents to develop leadership and other strengths directly related to your college experience.

Four key factors capture the basic aspects you should consider when planning an education that will lead to personal excellence.

Four Key Factors That Will Determine Your Achievements in Academics, Career, and Beyond

1. Your beliefs about your talents to achieve

Never underestimate the power of what you believe -- it will directly affect your achievements. What you believe about your talents can affect *whether you will even attempt to achieve*. Your beliefs directly influence your emotions, attitudes, behavior patterns, and motivation.

2. How well you know, understand, and value your talents

One of our primary goals is to increase your understanding of and appreciation for your greatest talents. This forms the basis for increasing your confidence and for building achievement patterns.

3. The extent to which you apply your talents through strengths

You should provide the initiative for designing your education around your talents. This is likely to produce superior results, because you won't be "getting" an education, you'll be creating one. And it will be based on who you really are and the person you have the capacity to become.

4. Your motivations, desires, and goal-setting practices

Numerous studies identify motivation as the single most important factor in academic achievement and graduation from college. Specifically, they point to two important motivational dynamics: First, you must have multiple motives for achieving and persisting. Second, these motives must be important to you personally. Having only one reason for achieving (for example, to make more money or to please someone else) usually results in lesser achievement.

Four Tips for Developing Academic Strengths in College

Your overall academic experience can be greatly enhanced by the perspective and direction you take in setting goals and making key decisions. Consider these four suggestions.

1. Define college success in terms of maximizing your talents through strengths development.

If you are going to assume responsibility for your college experience, you must come to grips with defining success for yourself.

So, what is the best outcome of college that you can imagine? Most people would say getting a 4.0 GPA, graduating Magna Cum Laude, getting a well-paying job, or gaining admission to medical school, law school, or some other graduate or professional school. These are good, but your considerations should go well beyond your college years. Defining college success in terms of identifying and building upon your greatest talents emphasizes *building yourself into a person of excellence*.

2. Select classes on the basis of your talents and strengths.

Considering your talents is particularly important as you select classes for the early portion of your college education. In these first couple of years, it is especially important to build your confidence by following your talents. Far too many students who enroll in college never graduate, and many of those who drop out do so in the first year. Why? Quite frequently, the reason is that they have selected classes that don't suit their talents. As a result, they don't experience the success they expected, and then they become frustrated and disillusioned and eventually give up.

Be sure to continue to apply the strengths approach during the rest of your college career. This means that *every time* you select your classes, ask yourself two questions: (1) Which of my talents will I be able to apply in this class? and (2) What strengths will this class help me create? If you don't know the answer to either of these questions, get more information about the classes you are considering. If you have to say "none" to both questions, you must ask yourself why you are enrolling in the class in the first place.

These comments may be controversial, so let's be clear: We are not anti-liberal arts, nor are we trying to undermine the need for all students to have certain basic skills. We are certainly not trying to limit students' exploration of new fields.

What we oppose is educational practices that give students placement tests to find out what students *can't do* or *don't know* -- and then force them to focus first on where they struggle before they can learn about their most naturally powerful talents.

3. Consider your talents when selecting extracurricular activities.

To gain maximum benefits from college, think about college as a total experience in which you *purposely become as deeply involved as possible*. This means making college the focal point of your life. Becoming personally involved might include forming study groups, meeting with professors, and making use of campus programs and services. If possible, live on campus or near campus -- and with other students -- or at least form close relationships with people from college.

As you make decisions about extracurricular involvement, seek opportunities to build on your talents in strengths development. For example, form relationships with professors and students who share your talents. Become involved in clubs and organizations that provide opportunities for you to use or develop strengths.

4. Choose your college jobs by considering the opportunities they provide to develop strengths by following your talents.

Most college students must work in order to make ends meet. That is a reality, but it is also true that employment during college presents another opportunity to build on your talents. Therefore, carefully consider where you'll be employed and what type of work you'll do. The most ideal situation would be (1) to work on campus so you can increase your involvement, and (2) to work in a job where you can use and build on at least some of your most natural talents. That way, you will be doing more than just earning money.

Strategies for Applying Your Talents in Academics

To help you determine how you can best apply your greatest talents toward strengths in academics, we have collected feedback from thousands of top-achieving college students. Through interviews, focus groups, case studies, and surveys, we have gathered insights about how these successful students perceived and applied their most powerful talents in several areas of academics.

Now, it's time to take a look at strategies that can help you use talents in your Signature Themes for achievement in various aspects of your academic life. Once again, locate and examine the strategies that are customized to your Signature Themes. As you do this, you may want to consider the items that are already helping you achieve and those that may help you achieve at an even greater level of excellence.

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