

A woman wearing a patterned hijab and a grey blazer is writing on a whiteboard with a white marker. She is looking intently at the board. In the background, several other people, including a man in a light blue shirt and a woman in a light blue shirt, are observing. The setting appears to be a professional meeting or workshop in a bright, modern office environment.

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# Steps for a Successful CliftonStrengths® for Students Initiative: How to Create a Thriving Campus

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Students expect higher education to help them build the lives they want to live. CliftonStrengths for Students can be the foundation for those lives — and create a thriving campus community — when students learn how to apply their strengths at colleges that know how to guide them.

As college and university leaders, you need an engaged campus and students with thriving well-being. CliftonStrengths is an engine for both when you incorporate it into your school's day-to-day programming as well as your long-term strategy.

Gallup has helped students and leaders improve engagement and well-being through life-changing CliftonStrengths for Students strategies at schools all over the country. Currently, more than half a million students attend strengths-based institutions of higher learning, and they have better lives in college and after graduation because of it.

The colleges and universities that have achieved the greatest impact don't consider CliftonStrengths for Students to be a one-time event or limit the focus to students' self-awareness alone. Rather, they have implemented CliftonStrengths for Students using a strategy that answers three fundamental questions:

- **Why** incorporate a strengths and well-being initiative?
- **Who** are the division leaders with the greatest impact on the strategy's outcome, and who in those divisions needs strengths-based education most?
- **How** will the school map the most effective methods to implement its strengths strategy, and how will campus leaders know if they are successful?

Answering these **why, who** and **how** questions *in that order* is vital.

There are no one-size-fits-all answers. No magic formula — if you do A+B+C with students, you will get a thriving campus — exists. Gallup doesn't offer a cookie-cutter program or implementation "rules."

But we can tell you that our model has helped some of the largest universities in the U.S. become more engaged, with a thriving student body and alumni who left school set up for success.

Because the **why, who** and **how** are unique to each campus and its purpose, Gallup's role is to partner with colleges to help university leaders:

- identify and educate the divisions that are best positioned for strengths interventions
- think in terms of transformation and strategy, not transactions
- build an engaged campus with students who have higher rates of well-being and who use their strengths

In this paper, we will show you the proven steps that will help your school's leaders, faculty, administrators and students execute a successful CliftonStrengths for Students initiative.

### What Not to Do

One campus' staff members attended a Gallup education session and got excited about how amazing strengths felt. They decided to spearhead CliftonStrengths on their campus. They had powerful conversations about how much students love strengths and how they want all students to know their strengths. They even wrote a vision statement that reflected their aspirations: "Discovering and applying strengths at our campus empowers the community by educating its members in the use of a distinctly positive approach to human interaction — one that creates possibilities of success for everyone."

That is certainly true, and it sounds nice. But the group did not think about outcomes, who would implement the idea or how to measure impact. So when the president, executive leaders and donors wanted proof of how they would fulfill their strategy, there was no way to prove that the vision statement had measurable outcomes.

Students expect higher education to help them build the lives they want to live.

## 1 Step 1: WHY What's your strategy?

First, establish **why** you are implementing CliftonStrengths. The answer should be closely linked to your school's mission. You need to articulate a strategy statement that allows faculty, staff, parents and students to understand why your school is investing its vital resources to create a thriving campus through CliftonStrengths.

Gallup recommends appointing a two- or three-person Executive Strengths Team to carefully think about and agree on a strategy statement that answers the question of **why**. The Executive Strengths Team may have a connection to future strengths programming, but its main purpose is decision-making.

To create an effective strategy statement, members of the Executive Strengths Team should thoroughly understand your campus' strengths, needs and points of pain. The team needs to think about *specific* outcomes, not generalities, to address those issues. Strategy statements that are too broadly stated lack clarity and proof of impact. Vague and indefinite strategy statements are not uncommon, and they can do real harm. Without proof of impact, there's no compelling reason to keep the initiative going, and your school's strengths programming will likely be shut down. With it goes the original financial investment, of course, but also the potential for greater campus engagement, higher student well-being, and meaningful long-term educational results for your students and your school.

### Strategy, Well-Being and Strengths

To help visualize the **why**, Gallup will lead the Executive Strengths Team through a strategy session using a well-being framework. This framework includes findings from Gallup's research into well-being, engagement and strengths, oriented for higher education and a campus environment.

Gallup has partnered in research showing that well-being, engagement and hope account for one-third of the variance in students' academic success. Graduates who were emotionally supported during college — who had a mentor who encouraged their hopes and dreams

and professors who cared about them as people and made them excited about learning — are three times as likely to have thriving well-being after college. They're also six times as likely to be attached to their alma mater.

Further, graduates who say their college was passionate about the long-term success of its students have 2.4 times higher odds of being engaged at work, and their odds of being emotionally attached to the college are 8.1 times higher.

Using these and other findings from our research, Gallup helps leaders align their CliftonStrengths strategy with their school's mission and desired long-term outcomes. And looking through the lens of a well-being framework helps them focus on specific outcomes and proof of impact.

Higher education gives people the knowledge they need to build an engaged life, and the five elements of well-being are the currency of a life that matters.

### The Five Elements of Well-Being

- **Purpose:** Liking what you do each day and being motivated to achieve your goals. Purpose well-being on campus is related to faculty and staff engagement and their ability to create excitement for learning and development.
- **Social:** Having supportive relationships and love in your life, including strong relationships with classmates, professors and staff.
- **Financial:** Managing your economic life to reduce stress and increase security. Student loans, college tuition and financial aid all affect students' financial well-being.
- **Community:** Liking where you live, feeling safe and having pride in your community, including pride in the campus, safety in residence halls and a sense of belonging.
- **Physical:** Having good health and enough energy to get things done daily. For students to have thriving physical well-being, they need nutritious meals, exercise, sufficient sleep and healthy mechanisms for dealing with stress.

Gallup consultants use the well-being framework as they guide members of the Executive Strengths Team to ask strengths-based questions such as: “As a university, where are we at our best within those five elements, and where do we need to do better? What are our institutional strengths, and what gets in our way of helping students thrive?”

The answers — which are different for every college — will help leaders craft a strengths strategy statement that includes well-being outcomes.

One university focused its strategy statement on the three things getting in the way of student success and fulfillment of the school’s mission — low rates of student engagement, community well-being and purpose well-being. Its strategy statement is:

*“We are using CliftonStrengths on our campus to drive student engagement and contribute to students’ community and purpose well-being while they are at the university and beyond.”*

This school’s strategy covers 5,000 students every year, but it’s still simple, actionable, measurable and directed at the outcomes that matter to the university. This is how all strategy statements for CliftonStrengths should be. With this type of focus, you will have direction for your CliftonStrengths initiative; without it, you won’t.



### Questions to Consider

- If a parent asked, “Why strengths?” how would you answer? Every faculty and administration member at your school should have the same answer, or your message will be confusing.
- Is your strategy specific? Clear? Actionable?
- Can you measure the outcomes of your strategy using viable metrics? The number of meetings and students’ emotional responses, for example, are not viable metrics.



## 2 Step 2: WHO Who will execute your strategy?

The next, and equally important, question is: **Who** will optimize and implement your CliftonStrengths strategy? Remember, the order of these steps (Why, Who, How) is vital to the success of your campus rollout. If you reverse the order between Step 1 and Step 2, you run the risk of having the wrong leaders sitting at the table.

To determine your **who**, consider these two factors: the CliftonStrengths Advisory Group and the education of the teams that fall under the CliftonStrengths Advisory Group's division leaders.

### CliftonStrengths Advisory Group

The Executive Strengths Team will select a CliftonStrengths Advisory Group. This group is made up of faculty and campus leaders who influence the largest number of first-year students. Be careful not to select your CliftonStrengths Advisory Group based on enthusiasm for strengths alone. You will be most successful when you choose leaders who can best implement your strengths strategy.

Gallup advises the Executive Strengths Team to think in terms of "touchpoints." A touchpoint is an *intentional* strengths intervention or conversation. There can be — and usually are — hundreds of unplanned strengths conversations every year. While spontaneous conversations are beneficial, for the best CliftonStrengths for Students initiative, you need to strategically map out and integrate **six unique, actionable touchpoints per student per year** into pre-existing programming.

To identify the most effective CliftonStrengths Advisory Group members, the Executive Strengths Team needs to determine the areas of the university that have the greatest hands-on influence on the strengths strategy *and* the largest numbers of students. Most schools need eight to 10 people with key leaders from each of those areas as well as faculty and students. Every CliftonStrengths Advisory Group member should have a specific role and clear responsibilities.

### A strong CliftonStrengths Advisory Group is made up of these roles:

- **Executive Strengths Team lead:** This key executive campus leader communicates the strategy statement, successes, impact and best practices of the CliftonStrengths initiative to the campus, cabinet or other executive leaders. The Executive Strengths Team lead doesn't necessarily need to attend every CliftonStrengths Advisory Group meeting.
- **Campus coordinator:** This team member leads the CliftonStrengths Advisory Group and makes sure that every strategic touchpoint takes place and that each division's programming is different. In addition, they coordinate education on campus and serve as the liaison between the CliftonStrengths Advisory Group and the Executive Strengths Team.
- **Division leaders:** These team members lead the divisions that will implement two touchpoints each. They make sure that all staff members in their division are aware of the CliftonStrengths Advisory Group and which touchpoints their division is responsible for. They also make sure that CliftonStrengths is woven into programming that already exists. This helps leaders naturally integrate CliftonStrengths into their division without overwhelming team members by adding new programs.
- **Faculty members:** Faculty members serve as an extension of the academic world and are vital to communicating the strategy and how students will view their strengths in the classroom. Faculty members can naturally integrate strengths into their teaching style, and the faculty members on the CliftonStrengths Advisory Group should be especially well-suited to academia-specific education and mentoring fellow faculty members.
- **Student leaders:** Student leaders on the CliftonStrengths Advisory Group represent and speak for students on your campus. They can provide valuable feedback about what students will and won't relate to. They can also serve as strengths coaches and teachers. Clearly, to fulfill your strengths strategy and for it to have the greatest impact, your students' voices need to be heard.



## Key Program Leaders

The CliftonStrengths Advisory Group will identify the key front-line leaders from each of their divisions to ensure that staff members are properly educated and prepared to roll out and implement six strengths touchpoints (two per division) in their divisions.

An effective CliftonStrengths Advisory Group is always aware of how and where targeted strengths touchpoints are taking place on campus, but it does not offer strengths professional development training. You don't want your CliftonStrengths Advisory Group members deviating from your campus strengths strategy. The more fidelity they have to your school's strategy, the better your school can educate the right leaders and sort students to strengths education opportunities off campus. That means the CliftonStrengths Advisory Group must be comfortable saying no to requests that diverge from your education model.

That targeted education model can look like this at schools that align it to strategy and — as Gallup advises — separate by division:

- In certain divisions (e.g., career or academic advising), strengths touchpoints are one-on-one. A CliftonStrengths coaching course provides the tools learners need for successful touchpoint conversations.
- In other divisions (e.g., leadership, Greek life, residence life), strengths touchpoints may be peer-to-peer or in large groups. These groups will need a broad overview of CliftonStrengths, engagement and well-being.

With three new divisions launching strengths touchpoints each year and two new, unique touchpoints per division, the rollout strategy will obviously expand from year to year. Gallup finds that educating and preparing 20% of the front-line staff/faculty in specified divisions each year is optimal.

Strategic timing and preparation — putting the right people on the right teams in the right order — is vital to the success of your rollout, and so is a robust support system. Staff members, especially those conducting programmatic touchpoints, need education and training *before* your full campus launch. If your staff

is not educated and prepared to facilitate strengths-based conversations with students, your strengths touchpoints will miss their target. This will weaken your approach and jeopardize your outcomes. And, most importantly, students will not get the CliftonStrengths education they deserve.

In addition, campus leaders need to begin every strengths education session, every staff/faculty meeting at which they discuss CliftonStrengths, every strengths touchpoint and every Gallup course a university hosts by articulating the CliftonStrengths strategy statement. Reiteration is reinforcement, and it keeps everyone focused on the same strategy. A strengths rollout is successful only with consistent branding and messaging of the specific campus strengths strategy.

### Questions to Consider

#### Executive Strengths Team questions to form the CliftonStrengths Advisory Group:

- What divisions, areas and classrooms have the greatest influence on your strategy statement? Are those leaders represented?
- What additional leaders do you need?

#### CliftonStrengths Advisory Group education questions:

- What division staff/team members need to attend education offerings in Year One? Year Two? Year Three? Year Four?
- What faculty members need to attend education offerings in Year One? Year Two?
- How does your training curriculum connect to the strategy?
- How can you do a better job of leading with the strategy?
- How can you best explain and market the strategy internally?

### 3 Step 3: HOW How will you operationalize and measure success?

CliftonStrengths will make lasting, positive change when you weave strengths into divisional programs that already exist on your campus. Strengths touchpoints should feel organic, not like separate “strengths only” events. That’s **how** a school meshes its mission and CliftonStrengths strategy. Think about implementing your **how** strategy in two parts:

- How will you map out six unique strengths touchpoints in three different divisions yearly (two per division)?
- How will you know if you are successful?

Gallup will guide each of the three division leaders/faculty members on the CliftonStrengths Advisory Group to integrate two touchpoints into their different divisions.

For example, one campus incorporates its six yearly touchpoints into these three divisions: residence life, academic advising and student organizations.

- Residence hall leaders include a touchpoint at the residence hall orientation, when students learn from each other about how their talents influence their interactions. Resident Advisers (RAs) integrate the second touchpoint into a mediation program that incorporates strengths in everything from meetings to roommate conflict.
- Academic advisers meet with students twice a year. They integrate their first touchpoint into a kickoff meeting, guiding students to use their strengths to create meaningful relationships with their professors even before they talk about selecting classes. In the second meeting, they focus on the student’s action items from their CliftonStrengths for Students report and discuss how to apply strengths to classroom learning.
- Leaders of student organizations make their first touchpoint an activity in which students talk about their talents to show the diversity of strengths in the group. The second touchpoint occurs later in the year: Leaders use a team talent map to show the group what the individuals in it naturally do well and what may get in the way of their success.

There will be many informal touchpoints beyond your targeted divisions — for example, professors describing their own strengths so students in their classes can understand them better, students talking about their own strengths with their friends, and administrators reminding students that they can put their strengths to use in ways they hadn’t considered. CliftonStrengths can quickly start to feel organic on your campus.

While those casual touchpoints do make an impact, it’s vital to identify the six strengths touchpoints within three specific divisions. Intention creates results.

The CliftonStrengths Advisory Group makes sure touchpoints don’t overlap and that they focus on the campus strengths strategy. That focus is important: Students might tune out repeated questions about their strengths and get bored doing the same activities over and over. Therefore, each strengths touchpoint should be unique to help students thrive as their understanding of strengths, engagement and well-being grows.

How you integrate CliftonStrengths for Students touchpoints changes as students do over the course of their education. For example, RAs will approach community well-being strengths touchpoints on the first day of the first semester differently than they will on the first day of the second semester. By the second semester, the RAs will understand the students’ strengths better (and the students will know their own strengths better as well). A sorority chapter president’s touchpoint about using CliftonStrengths to improve the chapter’s financial well-being will be different with a first-year member than with a fourth-year member.

The foundation of a powerful CliftonStrengths program sets schools up for a successful launch and the right vision for both short-term and long-term impact. The next step is measuring that impact.

Without valid measurement and proof of your program’s impact, there’s no way for you to know if you met your strategy’s goals. Without proof, you can’t verify the effectiveness of your investments of time and funding. And if you can’t justify continued investment and funding over the course of years, all of

the time, effort and hope the campus community put behind your CliftonStrengths initiative will be wasted.

*The foundation of a powerful CliftonStrengths program sets schools up for a successful launch and the right vision for both short-term and long-term impact.*

One mistake organizations make is defining success by the number of trainings, coaching conversations or programs they have and the attendees' responses. There is no doubt that strengths sessions can create an emotional response in students, but their feedback reflects their level of satisfaction. And satisfaction simply reflects popularity, which has no long-term impact.

Instead, schools should measure *engagement*. Unlike satisfaction, engagement creates positive postgraduation outcomes for students and an enduring emotional connection to their school, classmates and professors.

Gallup offers various tools to measure the impact of a college's strategies, particularly as they apply to engagement and well-being. While there is no such thing as one perfect measurement tool for everyone, we have partnered with schools to help them measure their purpose and their impact. What matters most depends on the school, but whatever you choose, it's important to measure what matters.

Remember, your campus CliftonStrengths strategy should not stand alone. You will be most successful when you link your strategy to your school's or president's strategic plan. Just as every staff member should see how their role affects the mission of the school, the CliftonStrengths strategy should also connect to the larger mission.

### Questions to Consider

- Which divisions have the greatest impact on your strategy?
- Which divisional programs have the largest numbers of students?
- Which elements of well-being is your campus struggling with most? Which divisions are best equipped to create touchpoints to address those areas?
- How will you know if your strategy is successful?
- How will you prove the value of your CliftonStrengths strategy to your school's president or to a donor?
- How does your proof align with the president's strategic plan?

**While over half a million students experience a life-changing CliftonStrengths education in a well-being framework every year, strengths touchpoints are different on every campus. No two Gallup best-practice campuses have launched CliftonStrengths for Students in the exact same way. But all of them have succeeded by moving through the right steps in the right order.**

Engagement creates positive postgraduation outcomes for students and an enduring emotional connection to their school, classmates and professors.

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