

Taylor University

Pillars at Taylor University

Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE)
Theses

Graduate Theses

2020

Durable Discipleship: The Value of a Strengths-Based Approach to Discipleship

Jacob Gerding

Follow this and additional works at: <https://pillars.taylor.edu/mahe>



Part of the [Higher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Gerding, Jacob, "Durable Discipleship: The Value of a Strengths-Based Approach to Discipleship" (2020).
Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE) Theses. 164.
<https://pillars.taylor.edu/mahe/164>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Theses at Pillars at Taylor University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master of Arts in Higher Education (MAHE) Theses by an authorized administrator of Pillars at Taylor University. For more information, please contact pillars@taylor.edu.

DURABLE DISCIPLESHIP: THE VALUE OF A STRENGTHS-BASED
APPROACH TO DISCIPLESHIP

A thesis

Presented to

The School of Social Sciences, Education & Business

Department of Higher Education and Student Development

Taylor University

Upland, Indiana

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts in Higher Education and Student Development

by

Jacob Gerding

May 2020

© Jacob Gerding 2020

**Higher Education and Student Development
Taylor University
Upland, Indiana**

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

MASTER'S THESIS

This is to certify that the Thesis of

Jacob Gerding

entitled

Durable Discipleship: The Value of a Strengths-Based Approach to Discipleship
has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the

Master of Arts degree
in Higher Education and Student Development

May 2020

Kelly Yordy, Ph.D. Date
Thesis Supervisor

Todd Ream, Ph.D. Date
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

Drew Moser, Ph.D. Date
Member, Thesis Hearing Committee

Tim Herrmann, Ph.D. Date
Director, M.A. in Higher Education and Student Development

Abstract

Jesus has commanded His Church to go into the entire world, making disciples, but how do so many different people do something so significant on such a massive scale? God has created each person to reflect His image, and He has given each of us talents and gifts—characteristics that set us apart from everyone else. These unique qualities are what God uses to empower us to accomplish His mission of making disciples. The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment is a tool designed to provide individuals with a greater understanding of their strengths, those characteristics that make them who they are. How can a tool such as the Clifton StrengthsFinder influence and assist disciples as they engage in the disciple-making process? The current study utilized a qualitative phenomenology, specifically individual interviews, to explore if individuals who understand their personal strengths, as identified by the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, experience an impact on how they engage with the discipleship process. Results from this study indicate that, amid variation in individual knowledge and understanding of personal strengths, participants experienced an impact with the discipleship process.

Acknowledgments

My last two years at in the MAHE program at Taylor have been some of the most incredible years of my life—years that have helped shape me more into the person God created me to be. From the numerous conversations with some of the best students to spaces of learning in class, I have fallen more and more in love with the work of higher education and student development and know, without a doubt, that this is my life's calling. If I had the opportunity to thank each person in these pages, I can confidently say it would be longer than the thesis itself. Nevertheless, I do want to take just a few pages to thank some people who have had the most incredible impact on my life these last two years, and for years to come.

Kelly, my thesis supervisor: This experience literally could not have happened without you. From the initial application interview and the meetings in your office, to the FaceTime call with you in your house with the pee chair, you have been incredibly present with me in the process of this research and the writing. You have been a constant source of encourage, support, and laughs when it was needed most. Thank you for the hours you spent reading through the words on these pages, the questions you asked that pushed me farther than I thought I could go, and for being okay with me having your picture taped to my laptop for the duration of my time in MAHE.

Julia, my discipleship supervisor: From our very first conversation at the high table by The Bean, your presence alone has influenced my life in ways I will probably

continue to discover years from now. The questions you asked over the last two years have pushed me to enter into spaces and reflect on my life and the world around me. Most important of it all, in a space where I felt as though I was not cut out for the job I was doing in Wengatz, you gave me the most profound, yet simple advice: “Jacob, just be kind to yourself.” I will carry that advice with me for the rest of my life.

Wengatz, my home: You welcomed me into your space from the very beginning. You welcomed me into your traditions, into your wings, and into your lives. You each love each other so well, and I was lucky enough to be a recipient of that love on so many occasions. From the late-night conversations sitting at the front desk to watching the crazy wing movies (oh man, so crazy), thank you for allowing me the space to walk alongside you for the last two years.

Both DA staffs, my space of growth: Both groups of Wengatz DAs have been an integral part of my experience at Taylor, and it was with you I learned, grew, and experienced the LORD at work. You guys provided me with so much joy, love, laughs, engaging conversations, thoughtful questions, and life-long friends. Without each of you, my Taylor experience would not have been the same. I will forever be thankful for the ways each of you has spoken into my life and leadership. Thank you, Danny G., Sam, Jake, Jason, Mike, Justin, Jack, Drew, Josh C., Garrett, Evan, JD, Landon, Theo, Josh B., and Josiah. You guys are the absolute best.

Family, my foundation: You guys have always been my biggest support system and my loudest fan club. You have shown me what unconditional love looks like as each of you love so wholeheartedly and without restraint. You have been with me through it all, from the very beginning, and I am confident that you will be the consistent

foundation as I go forward. Thank you for all the uncontrollable laughs, the awkward conversations, the heartfelt care, and the forever family that I have with each of you.

Friends, my support: Many of you have been in my life for years, while some just for a year or less. No matter the time, you have been and are such an important part of my life and these last two years. You have asked important questions, you have prayed for me, you have encouraged me to keep going, and you have provided presence—whether from a distance or in proximity. You may have seen me at my worst or at my best, yet you love the same no matter what. You have eaten lunch or dinner with me, you have sat with me on FaceTime, you have taken walks with me, and you have stayed up late enjoying each other’s company. Without each of you, life would not be what it is. Thank you for who you are and for the ways you live out Christ in your unique ways. Thank you for your friendship. I will forever be grateful for the opportunity to have you each in my life.

Luke, my Thursday dinner plans: October 10, 2018—our first DC dinner. From very early on, you have been such a consistent part of my time at Taylor. You have taught me so many things, but I think more than anything, you have taught me: (1) what it looks like to be a friend and (2) how to pursue the LORD in the most authentic way. Thank you for the genuine conversations we have shared, the ridiculous moments of unstoppable laughter, the wisest advice, and the countless hours of prayer. Thank you for being the biggest supporter, the most authentic version of yourself, and for becoming a forever friend. Luke, *you* are a life-raft that takes me closer to the lifeboat of Jesus.

Team Greece, my “Big Problems”: Y’all up? From the sidewalks of Moria to the small, cramped rooms of the Cosmo, you all have seen it all—the sick, the stressed, the

joyful, the scared, the tearful, and the tired (so tired). You all were some of the most encouraging, supportive, and loving people at a time when so much unexpected was taking place. Thank you for the ways you loved so well, the ways you served so well, and the ways you gave all of yourselves. I will forever remember those weeks in Lesvos and the time shared with you over an uncountable amount of Freddos, lukewarm pasta, and the wide array of smells our noses experienced.

The participants, my collaborators: This research would not have been possible without your participation. Thank you for the ways you sacrificed a bit of your time to collaborate with me on this subject. Thank you for your thoughts, your words, and the ways you embraced every part of this research.

Jesus, my faithful Savior: Thank you, LORD, for being just that—a faithful Savior. If I have learned anything from You over the last two years, it is how You continue to be faithful in every season. The last two years have been full of new experiences, new friendships, new growth, but You, LORD, have been consistent. You have never failed to show Yourself faithful and true. In moments when I did not reflect You as I should have, and in moments when I felt as close as I could to Your Presence, You were the same, never changing. Thank You for giving me these last two years to learn more about the calling You have placed on my life. Thank You for giving me the opportunity to serve those who, as I am, are daily seeking to reflect You. Thank You for giving me friends, family, and professors who care and love so well. Thank You for Taylor University and the ways You have used it to challenge me, shape me, and to bring me closer to You. LORD, as I move forward, would You continue to be as I have known you to be—faithful.

Table of Contents

Abstract	iii
Acknowledgements	iv
Chapter 1 Introduction	1
Clifton StrengthsFinder	1
Strengths in Discipleship	3
Purpose of the Study	4
Chapter 2 Literature Review	5
Strengths Defined	6
Development of Clifton StrengthsFinder	8
Purpose of Clifton StrengthsFinder	9
Clifton StrengthsFinder and College Students	10
Disciple Defined	12
Discipleship Defined	13
Discipleship on a College Campus	14
A Strengths-Based Approach to Discipleship	15
Conclusion	16
Chapter 3 Methodology	18
Design	18
Context and Participants	19

Procedures	20
Data Analysis	22
Conclusion	23
Chapter 4 Results	24
Varied Levels of Prior Knowledge and Exposure	25
Varied Levels of Change	26
Personal Strengths Impact Relationships	27
Personal Strengths are Valuable	29
Conclusion	30
Chapter 5 Discussion	32
Discussion of the Findings	32
Implications for Practice	36
Implications for Further Research	37
Limitations	38
Conclusion	39
References	40
Appendix A: Individual Interview Questions	44
Appendix B: Informed Consent	46

Chapter 1

Introduction

Imagine what the world would be like if we focused on what is right with people, rather than what is wrong. Imagine what the Church would be like if we focused on what is right with people, rather than what is wrong. Imagine what discipleship would be like if we focused on what is right with people, rather than what is wrong. Studying what is right with people began when American psychologist Don Clifton, who helped form what we know today as the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, asked these very questions.

Clifton StrengthsFinder

Clifton StrengthsFinder began as the result of numerous studies conducted by Clifton and a team of researchers regarding successful people within business, education, healthcare, and other disciplines. With over 100,000 talent-based interviews, Clifton and his team hoped to discover what contributed to these individuals experiencing success. The team developed an assessment out of the interview themes, resulting in the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment that over 22 million people worldwide have taken and utilized to experience their own levels of success (Gallup, n.d.). In addition to the assessment came the idea of strengths philosophy which, according to Clifton and Harter (2003), is the belief that “individuals gain more when they build on their talents” (p. 1).

A central focus of strengths philosophy is the idea that every individual has talents. When individuals combine these talents with knowledge and skill, a strength is

formed. According to Clifton, Anderson, and Schreiner (2006), a talent is simply a natural pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that an individual experiences repeatedly. Additionally, knowledge is what an individual knows, either through experience or learned facts, and skill is the “basic ability to perform the specific steps of an activity” (Clifton et al., 2006, p. 4). According to Winseman, Clifton, and Liesveld (2008), a strength is the ability to “provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity” (p. 7) through the combination of talents, knowledge, and skill. The purpose of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment is to help individuals gain an awareness of their talent themes—what comes naturally to them—so they can build up their talents through knowledge and skills and experience the development of strengths. It is the hope of this assessment and the team that developed it that taking these steps to develop strengths will help individuals experience success.

College students are a group who can take advantage of the work and research conducted by Clifton and his team as they (college students) consistently strive to experience success in college. Colleges and universities across the nation take pride in helping students become competent, lifelong learners (Busteed & Stutzman, 2015). Through the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, college students learn how to become aware of and use their talents to develop personal strengths and experience growth and success in life. Students within the Christian university context have an additional layer of discovery as they learn about their talents, as they can discover the ways in which God has created them with unique gifts and talents. In addition, students who attend a Christian university are able to learn how their uniqueness can leave an impact on eternity as a Christ follower, or disciple.

Strengths in Discipleship

In today's context, "Christ follower" and "disciple" could be considered synonymous. A disciple is a learner, or follower, who claims Jesus as Savior and God and has embarked on a journey to follow Jesus (Wilkins, 1992), choosing to live a life that reflects Him daily. This journey of commitment and following that the disciple embarks on is defined as discipleship. Additionally, discipleship can be defined as the relationship between two believers who embark upon the journey of following Jesus together (Herman, 2008). In Matthew 28:19 (English Standard Version), Jesus provides a commission for His disciples to "go...and make disciples of all nations." This commission provides clear responsibilities for all disciples to go into the world and make more disciples. This commandment requires full engagement and participation in the process and journey as disciples choose to begin the journey with themselves and others.

The journey of discipleship is a large part of the community that comprises Christian college campuses. Many of these campuses provide students with opportunities to engage in the discipleship process—occurring through activities such as small groups, chapel services, classroom engagement, and day-to-day conversations. In addition, Christian college campuses, much like public college campuses, provide students with opportunities to discover who they are and develop an identity separate from that of their parents, while simultaneously learning and developing as productive citizens in society (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). Unique to many Christian college campuses, however, is the idea that students receive a live-in discipleship experience. These students get to experience what it means to live life as a disciple of Christ, to discover who they are in Christ, and to learn about and embrace the unique qualities and

gifts that God has given to them—all while obtaining an education. These students gain an understanding of how their uniqueness contributes to the ways in which they embrace life as a disciple of Christ and their role within the discipleship journey.

In a life lived through a strengths-based approach, individuals know and understand their uniqueness and strengths. Clifton and Anderson (2004) discussed a strength-based approach to leadership as focusing on who people are and the strengths they bring to the table. It is worth considering whether disciples who are engaged in the discipleship process have similarities with leaders engaged in the leadership process, as both require having influence, self-awareness, and empowerment. A strengths-based approach to discipleship allows disciples the awareness to know what they offer—what strengths they bring—and how to capitalize on those strengths to make disciples.

Additionally, a strengths-based approach to discipleship improves one's understanding of others. Disciples who can understand the gifts and strengths of others on the discipleship journey have a greater capacity to train, encourage, and challenge.

Purpose of the Study

Understanding what, if any, value exists for disciples utilizing their gifts and strengths in the discipleship journey proves necessary. Current research lends itself to an understanding of a strengths-based approach in leadership, academics, and other various areas, but few studies exist on a strengths-based approach within discipleship and if a relationship between the two exists. This research served as a bridge between the strengths-based research and discipleship to uncover what, if any, impact a strength-based approach to discipleship has on the disciple, as well as the discipleship journey.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Almost 20 years have passed since the first version of Clifton StrengthsFinder began, and it has grown exponentially in the number of people who have taken the assessment and used it for development and growth. Focused on the investment of talents and knowledge, the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment first surfaced when Don Clifton expressed interest in studying what was right with people. The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, focused on using one's innate gifts and abilities to experience personal growth, has since branched out into many different areas from business and education to the church. Some people within the church have embraced what Clifton first developed for businesses, as they see the value associated with investing in the ways God has gifted His people and how the assessment can encourage growth in a life that daily reflects Christ.

This chapter explores the basics that comprise the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment and overviews the necessary definitions to provide context for the research. In addition, it discusses how the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment began and developed, before transitioning to explore the purpose of the assessment. The chapter then brings together the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment and higher education, exploring how the assessment has been used across institutions to assist student learning. Finally, the chapter defines key concepts regarding discipleship, explores discipleship in

a college or university setting, and then brings together the concept of Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment with discipleship.

Strengths Defined

Many different definitions of strengths exist today. For the purpose of this study, strength is defined as the ability to “provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity” (Winseman, Clifton, & Liesveld, 2008, p. 7). According to Bowers and Lopez (2010), a strength is comprised of three factors: (1) talents, (2) knowledge, and (3) skills. These three factors combined create an individual’s strengths. The concept of strengths begins with talents, as each individual has a natural group of talents (Clifton et al. 2006).

Talent. A talent is a “naturally recurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied” (Clifton et al., 2006, p. 2). Winseman et al. (2008) addressed talents as what exist naturally within a person—what a person does instinctively. In other words, talents are “among the most real and most authentic aspects of [an individual’s] personhood” (Clifton et al., 2006, p. 2). According to Clifton et al. (2006), it is the specific set of talents a person has that make them unique. These unique talents, classified in a number of different ways, highlight the “natural tendency to: be competitive, pick up on the emotions of others, thrive under pressure, make others laugh, enjoy puzzles, recognize the uniqueness in others, and envision and clearly articulate a future scenario” (Clifton et al., 2006, p. 8).

Understanding the purpose of talents is an important step, as it relates to beginning the process of developing talents into strengths. Talents create a sense of empowerment, which gives way to a higher level of excellence in performance. As well,

talents serve as a way for individuals to reach their fullest potential, which is why it is important to know, understand, and value talents (Clifton et al., 2006). An individual's understanding and awareness of the unique set of talents provides an avenue to understanding how those talents relate to the individual's strengths, or as Winseman et al. (2008) explained, "The key to building a strength is first to identify [an individual's] dominate themes of talent..." (p. 7). When an understanding of an individual's talents becomes clear, a development of strengths can begin because strengths are "produced when talents are refined with knowledge and skill" (Clifton et al., 2006, p. 4).

Knowledge. The process of refining natural talents comes second to understanding and defining knowledge and skill. Winseman et al. (2008) defined knowledge simply as what an individual knows. They suggested knowledge can be acquired through education or training and include two different types: factual knowledge and experiential knowledge (Winseman et al., 2008). Factual knowledge, for example, includes "the words of a foreign language, the books of the Bible, software features, or the table of periodic elements" (Winseman et al., 2008, p. 9). According to Buckingham and Clifton (2001), this kind of content-based factual knowledge "won't guarantee excellence, but excellence is impossible without it" (p. 41).

Conversely, experiential knowledge, as suggested by Winseman et al. (2008), is knowledge that is learned or gained through experience. Experiential knowledge cannot be taught or found in a book and requires individuals to apply discipline in order to learn and retain the knowledge (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Understanding knowledge is a good place to start when an individual wants to begin the process of refining talents; however, an understanding of skills is required, as well.

Skills. Skills are the “basic abilities to move through the fundamental steps of a task” (Winseman et al., 2008, p. 8) and can be acquired through either formal or informal training. Winseman et al. (2008) suggested that, once individuals acquire the skills needed for any given activity, they have the ability to perform the required steps at a base-level ability. More specifically, according to Buckingham and Clifton (2001), skills “bring structure to experiential knowledge” (p. 45), and the authors suggested that, if individuals want to build their strengths, they need to “learn and practice all the relevant skills available” (p. 46). Combined, skills and knowledge create talent, and according to Clifton et al. (2006), “many of the skills and much of the knowledge that are combined with talent to create a strength come through experience” (p. 4).

According to Winseman et al. (2008), the fundamental building block for any strength is talent. Adding the right knowledge and skills enhances talent, which creates a strength. For individuals who desire to live out their strengths, Winseman et al. (2008) suggested individuals need to “first identify [their] greatest talents” (p. 10), which can be done by taking the Clifton StrengthsFinder. The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment provides individuals with their top five talent themes. Ideally, personal strengths develop through knowledge and skill investment in talents themes.

Development of Clifton StrengthsFinder

To answer the question, “What would happen if we studied what is right with people?” educational psychologist Donald Clifton assembled a team to develop “a common language for talent” (Rath, 2007, p. 16). With a desire to provide organizations and individuals with specific terms to describe what people do well, Clifton and his team worked through over 100,000 talent-based interviews, looking for data patterns. The

team looked through specific questions in studies of “successful executives, salespeople, customer service representatives, teachers, doctors, lawyers, students, nurses, and several other professions and fields” (Rath, 2007, p. 16) to identify the most common themes of talent. Through the research came the first version of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, which initially began in 1999 as a 35-theme version of the assessment (Rath, 2007). After months of data collection, researchers revisited the assessment and decided on 180 items, as well as 34 themes. Since 1999, some theme names changed, but the overall descriptions for each of the 34 themes have not changed (Rath, 2008).

At the foundation of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment is strengths philosophy, which formed the basis for the positive psychology movement. Strengths philosophy is the philosophy in which developing strengths is the basis for achieving excellence (Schreiner, 2006). According to Clifton and Harter (2003), the strengths philosophy is the belief that “individuals gain more when they build on their talents, than when they make comparable efforts to improve their areas of weakness” (p. 1).

By asking the question, “What is right with people?” Clifton and his team found a pattern and conducted further research on the question that initially sparked Clifton’s interest. With this information and the strengths philosophy as its foundation, Clifton and his team developed the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment. Over the years, many people have used the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment to find words for what is right with them; they built on their talents to see success in the workplace, home, and everyday life.

Purpose of Clifton StrengthsFinder

With the strengths philosophy as its foundation, Clifton and his team originally developed the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment for “business and industry to identify

talent as the basis for increasing the productivity and morale of employees” (Schreiner, 2006, p. 3). More specifically, the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment measured the “raw talents that can serve as the foundation of strengths” (Asplund, Lopez, Hodges, & Harter, 2007, p. 6). The assessment measured the talents by identifying “signature themes” that serve as a “starting point in the discovery of talents that can be productively applied to achieve success” (Asplund et al., 2007, p. 6). The assessment is for “personal development and growth” (Schreiner, 2006, p. 2). The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment is intended to be used as a tool for self-awareness and as a “springboard for discussion with managers, friends, colleagues, and advisers” (Rath, 2008, p. 245).

The Clifton StrengthsFinder is an assessment with purpose for many different people in many different areas of life. In *Living Your Strengths*, Winseman et al. (2008) wrote to teach readers how to identify and affirm talents, as well as how to use those talents for growth and service in the church. Tom Rath (2008), in his book *Strengths Based Leadership*, identified three keys to being a more effective leader: (a) knowing personal strengths and investing in the strengths of others, (b) placing the people with the right strengths on your team, and (c) understanding and meeting the four basic needs of followers. *StrengthsQuest: Discover and Develop Your Strengths in Academics, Career, and Beyond* (Clifton et al., 2006) assists teachers and students in understanding how they can use strengths to encourage success and growth in academics, career, and life.

Clifton StrengthsFinder and College Students

Within the field of higher education, strengths-based models have increased in recent years (Louis, 2012). Strengths-based models represent a return to “education principles that emphasize the positive aspects of student effort and elevate student

strengths” (Louis, 2012, p. 4). According to Anderson (2004), strengths-based education models involve a process of “assessing, teaching, and designing experiential learning activities to help students identify their greatest talents, and to then develop and apply strengths based on those talents” (p. 1). The objective of a strength-based education model is to “aid students in applying their talents” and enable them to reach “unattained levels of personal excellence,” which helps students become confident, life-long learners with a greater sense of purpose (Louis, 2012, p. 4).

Helping students become confident, life-long learners with a greater sense of purpose is a goal of most colleges and universities. Many students attend a higher education institution with an end-goal to influence individuals, groups, and organizations. Students view college as a “stepping-stone to careers in which they will be leaders” (Clifton & Anderson, 2004, p. 1). Clifton and Anderson (2004) suggested leaders “know their talents” and strive to “build their lives upon their talents by developing and applying strengths” and that “strengths-based leaders lead with their talents and strengths” (p. 4).

Schreiner (2006) stated the intent of a strengths-based education model within higher education is to enable students to identify talents they bring into the learning environment in order to capitalize on them and “achieve academic success and personal growth” (p. 2). Also, according to Soria, Roberts, and Reinhard (2015), at the core of a strengths-based approach is the ability to enhance “self-awareness by providing individuals with insights into their unique combination of talents” (p. 90). However, Seemiller (2017) noted leveraging strengths is “more than just about self-awareness” (p. 40)—it also involves building talents into strengths and requires individuals to be intentional with the process.

Since its creation in 1999, over 600 college campuses and over one million college students have completed and engaged with the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment (Soria et al., 2015). Used within various contexts, the assessment influences students in first-year seminar courses, other postsecondary courses, and settings outside the college classroom (Louis, 2012). In addition, within the higher education context, the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment and the idea of a strengths-based education model influences a student's ability to develop academic strength, leadership strength, become the best educator and learner, and plan for a future career (Clifton et al. 2006). A strengths-based education model that uses the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment has tremendous outcomes for college students who seek to influence and impact the world around them by learning about their talents and building those talents into strengths.

Originally developed for the business world, the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment has since expanded to educational contexts. With its purpose to give voice to the positive aspects of student efforts, the assessment gives students opportunities to discover and build confidence in who they are. Students who know their talents can build on them and have a much better chance to experience personal success and growth. The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment serves as a way for college students to learn more about themselves in the context of academia and to discover how to use those talents and strengths post-graduation in the workforce and in their personal lives.

Disciple Defined

The word “disciple” can have different definitions and meanings to a number of different people within different contexts. A disciple, according to Hull (2006), is “a learner or follower – usually someone committed to a significant master” (p. 32). This

definition of a disciple is prevalent throughout the context of Christianity, with the “significant master” referring to Jesus Christ. Within the context of Christianity, and more specifically within the context of the Gospels, the term “disciple” referred to “Jesus’ followers” and was a “common referent for those known in the early church as believers, Christians, brothers/sisters, those of the Way, or saints” (Wilkins, 1992, p. 40). According to Wilkins (1992), the term “disciple” was used at least “230 times in the Gospels and 28 times in Acts” (p. 40).

“Disciple” defined in today’s context is similar to how those in the Gospels and Acts would have defined it. According to Wilkins (1992), a disciple “is one who has come to [Jesus] for eternal life, has claimed [Jesus] as Savior and God, and has embarked upon the life of following [Jesus]” (p. 41). Similar to what a disciple was during the Gospel writings, a disciple today is a learner or follower, committed to Christ and committed to reflecting Him. Discipleship, then, is the journey or process a disciple embarks on to become more like Christ and, according to Hull (2006), “discipleship is what a disciple does” (p. 34).

Discipleship Defined

Discipleship, defined in two ways, expresses either the journey of an individual believer or the journey two believers embark on together. As Hull (2006) noted, discipleship “describes the ongoing life of the disciple” as well as “the broader Christian experience” (p. 35). While the word “discipleship” in and of itself is not a “pure biblical expression” but rather a derivative, most Christians accept “discipleship as the process of following Jesus” (Hull, 2006, p. 35).

The second view of discipleship places focus on the relationship between two believers who embark on the journey of following Jesus. According to Herman (2008), discipleship is “a process by which growing Christians impart their knowledge and experience in the Lord Jesus to newer Christians in the context of personal relationships” (p. 74). In addition, Herman (2008) noted that discipleship does not just happen but instead is a “very deliberate and specific process” that requires “strategy, time, and prayer” (p. 74). Furthermore, Herman (2008) described discipleship as a personal relationship between two believers in which each individual is given the “basic knowledge and skills necessary to grow toward maturity in Christ” (p. 74).

Discipleship on a College Campus

Herman (2008) claimed that discipleship is a process, not a program. In addition to this, Herman (2008) stated that the “principles of discipleship must be applied and tailored to [each] unique situation” (p. 51). The college experience is, in and of itself, a unique situation. Further, the Christian college experience is a unique experience. For many, the Christian college campus is an environment where students have the opportunity to explore what it looks like to live within a discipleship community. Students who attend a university with an emphasis on the discipleship community can experience living with like-minded believers who encourage them along in the discipleship journey and process. From weekly chapel services to residence hall small groups, students receive a glimpse of what being a learner and follower of Jesus looks like while learning from and investing in the lives of fellow disciples.

The college years are an incredibly formative time for students developmentally. In addition, the years students spend on a Christian college campus prove spiritually

formative. The college years allow space for students to discover who God has uniquely created them to be. Further, the college years are a space for students to learn how they can maximize the discovery to understand themselves and who they are and, in turn, leverage that understanding to engage with the discipleship process.

A Strengths-Based Approach to Discipleship

According to Clifton and Anderson (2004), leadership “involves an influential relationship...designed to produce real changes” (p. 3), and almost every college graduate “will be involved in some type of influence relationship” (p. 3). Clifton and Anderson (2004) described leaders as people who “know their talents”—they know “what they naturally do best” and choose to “build their lives upon their talents by developing and applying strengths” (p. 4). A strength-based approach to leadership, according to Clifton and Anderson (2004), “focuses on who the people are and the strengths they bring...” (p. 3). In addition, Clifton and Anderson (2004) noted that, for leaders to be effective, they must “identify their own strengths” (p. 3).

Being a disciple engaged in the process of discipleship is much like being a leader engaged in the process of leadership. As Clifton and Anderson (2004) stated, leadership involves an influential relationship; likewise, discipleship involves an influential relationship (*English Standard Version*, 2001, John 13:34-45). For Clifton and Anderson (2004), leaders are people who know their talents; similarly, disciples are people who know the gifts and abilities that God has gifted them. Clifton and Anderson (2004) found that leaders with a strengths-based approach to leadership acknowledge who people are and the strengths they bring; in like fashion, disciples with a strengths-based approach to

discipleship acknowledge the gifts and abilities that other disciples have and develop them for Kingdom growth.

To be a disciple with a strengths-based approach to discipleship adds another dimension to the discipleship process. A disciple who knows the ways in which God has gifted him or her in light of the StrengthsFinder assessment has another avenue to invest in the development of other disciples on the discipleship journey. During his journey developing the assessment, Don Clifton “discovered that our lives are shaped by our interactions with others” (Rath & Clifton, 2009, p. 1), and this is a key concept to a strengths-based approach to discipleship. Having the opportunity to shape the lives of others through investment in personal talents, as well as the talents of others, is an important aspect to the discipleship process. God has created every person uniquely and with intention, so it only makes sense for disciples to enhance the discipleship process by learning about and developing their talents.

Conclusion

The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment has experienced exponential growth since its inception in 1999. After almost 20 years, over 21 million people have taken the assessment and used it for development and growth. The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, which focuses on the investment of talents and knowledge, came about when Clifton expressed interest in studying what was right with people. Originally created for the business sector, the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment has since branched out into many different industries, from education to the church. The church has used the Clifton StrengthsFinder as a tool to learn more about the ways God has created its members with unique gifts and talents. Further, the church has used the assessment to discover how

they can invest in the ways God has gifted His people and how He can work through an understanding of those ways to encourage growth to become more like Him. Therefore, this research sought to discover if the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment has an impact on how individuals engage with the discipleship process.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study was conducted to explore the possible impact an understanding of Clifton StrengthsFinder may have on the process of discipleship. Through a qualitative approach, the researcher sought to gain insight into these possible impacts by studying a group of college student leaders. The qualitative approach was exploratory in its qualitative nature. A qualitative approach allowed the researcher to “analyze the data for description and themes using text analysis” and “interpret the larger meaning of the findings” (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 16).

Design

The research design was a qualitative approach, more specifically, a phenomenological approach utilized to “reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). Hermeneutical phenomenology was selected because of the value in the “common meaning for several individuals of their shared experiences” (Creswell, 2013, p. 76). According to Creswell (2013), a phenomenology “discusses the essence of the experience for individuals incorporating ‘what’ they have experienced and ‘how’ they experienced it” (p. 79). The essence of the research culminated from exploring if understanding Clifton StrengthsFinder results has an impact on the discipleship.

The phenomena explored with this research began with a training session for selected student leaders, in preparation for their upcoming leadership role. The training sessions were followed by an online survey sent to each student leader who participated in the training. Months later, another training session was provided for the same group of student leaders, followed by another online survey. After two months of involvement in the leadership roles, the researcher contacted all the selected student leaders to invite them to participate in further study on their shared experience.

Phenomenological approach. According to van Manen (1990), phenomenological research is “to question something,” as well as to question “what something is ‘really’ like” (p. 42). The researcher chose hermeneutical phenomenology, established through individual interviews. The reason for utilizing hermeneutical phenomenology is that it attempts to “grasp the essential meaning of something” (van Manen, 1990, p. 77)—a lived experience. The interviews expanded upon the information gained from the pre- and post-test measures, the two online surveys, and examined “the meaning of experience for individuals” (Creswell, 1998, p. 86). Throughout the interviews, the researcher mobilized “participants to reflect on their experiences in order to determine the deeper meanings or themes” (van Manen, 1990, p. 98) of the phenomenon.

Context and Participants

The research was conducted at a small, faith-based university located in the Midwest. Student leaders who engaged with the on-campus discipleship process and worked to foster discipleship relationships through spiritual formation opportunities were invited to participate in the qualitative study. Approximately 50 to 60 student leaders,

representing each on-campus residence hall, took the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment. The student leaders ranged in class level status from sophomore to senior and included both female and male students. For the first online survey, all who attended the initial all-staff training session on April 11, 2019, were included. For the second online survey, all who attended the all-staff training session on August 22, 2019, were included. Then, only the student leaders who expressed interest participated in an individual interview. A total of five interviews were conducted with five different student leaders.

Procedures

Before conducting the study, the research obtained approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) where the study took place. The data collection process for this study utilized homogeneous and convenience sampling to select participants for the individual interviews. In order to provide consistency in identifying the participants of the study, each was given a pseudonym used throughout the research results.

To select participants for the qualitative data collection, the researcher used homogeneous sampling because the group of student leaders possessed “a similar trait or characteristic” (Creswell, 2012, p. 208). The researcher emailed the student leaders, requesting their voluntary participation in an individual interview. After three different emails were sent to the total group of student leaders, the researcher acquired five student leaders willing to participate in individual interviews, and the interviews were scheduled. Because of the limited number of responses and a desire to complete the interviews before the end of the semester, convenience sampling was utilized.

Before the individual interviews took place, the researcher conducted a pilot study with the individual who supervises the group of student leaders included in the study.

The purpose of the pilot was to “refine the interview questions and the procedures further” (Creswell, 2013, p. 165). Following the pilot, the researcher refined the wording and structure of the protocol before finalizing it for the individual interviews. The full and final protocol used for the study is included in Appendix A.

The protocol consisted of 10 open-ended questions. The questions began broad, addressing topics such as prior exposure to the StrengthsFinder assessment and how much the two training sessions helped participants to understand their strengths better. The questions narrowed to ask about engagement with discipleship prior to beginning their leadership position and after. The questions narrowed more to bridge together the participants’ StrengthsFinder results with their understanding of discipleship to assess if any changes occurred in engagement. The questions narrowed further to discover if the participants had noticed any of their specific StrengthsFinder results at work in their leadership positions and, if so, which results they had seen more at work. Finally, the questions asked participants if they had conducted any further research on their own regarding the StrengthsFinder assessment before asking if they wished to share anything else. The researcher designed the protocol in such a way that responses would provide insights to assist in answering the overall research question: “Does an understanding of an individual’s personal strengths impact the way they engage with the discipleship process?”

To conduct the individual interviews, the researcher secured a private room in the university library. Participants arrived at the room at the time of their scheduled interview and met the researcher. Each participant was greeted and thanked for volunteering to participate in the study. Before beginning each interview, the researcher

read the consent form (see Appendix B) with the participant, providing each one with a copy for their records. The participant was made aware that the interview would be recorded, and each participant signed the consent form acknowledging what was included in the consent form. The researcher started the recording and the interview began. Following the conclusion of the 10 protocol questions, the researcher ended the recording and thanked the participant again for volunteering. After the participant left, the researcher immediately transferred the audio file to a personal, password protected computer and deleted the audio file from the device.

Data Analysis

Following each individual interview, the researcher organized the collected data. The audio file for each interview was placed in a computer file before being transcribed. The transcribed data for each interview were then compiled into one document. The researcher read each transcribed interview and made notes in the margin of the document. The purpose of this was to gain “a sense of the whole database” (Creswell 2013, p. 183). After five to seven times reading through the transcribed interviews as a whole, the researcher began to interpret the data by sorting and labeling the material into codes and themes. To do this, the researcher transferred each transcribed interview into a new document, where each interview was divided by participant and coded by each interview question. After this process was finished for each participant’s responses, the researcher took the codes gathered and transferred them to another new document, where they were separated by question and color coded to delineate each participant’s responses. The researcher then read each question while reviewing each participant’s responses and looked for “broad units of information” (Creswell, 2013, p. 186), consisting of similar

codes brought together to form one idea or theme. These themes were then organized by how often they appeared and some condensed into new themes.

Conclusion

With an understanding of how the study was conducted, who participated in the study, and how the data was collected, it is important to now present the results of the study. In the chapter to follow, the researcher provides the results by way of presenting the four major themes revealed from the study. The results proved to give insights to answer the overall research question.

Chapter 4

Results

To answer the question, “Does an understanding of an individual’s personal strengths impact the way they engage with the discipleship process?” the researcher conducted a phenomenological study of student leaders at a small, faith-based university located in the Midwest. Five student leaders volunteered to participate in an individual interview, providing answers to 10 open-ended questions. The researcher then analyzed the responses and the results are presented below.

By utilizing a qualitative individual interview approach, the researcher’s process involved coding the data for themes to present the “essence of the phenomenon” (Creswell, 2013, p. 82). The research generated four major themes, each supporting the overall idea that the StrengthsFinder assessment has a varying degree of impact on engagement with discipleship for the participants of this study. The four themes include the following: (1) varied levels of prior knowledge and exposure to the StrengthsFinder assessment; (2) varied levels of change exist in understanding of discipleship after learning about personal strengths; (3) personal strengths impact relationship with others; and (4) personal strengths seen as valuable for self-awareness.

Each interview, which occurred approximately three months after the final training session for the selected student leaders, consisted of 10 open-ended questions, referred to as the interview protocol (Creswell, 2013). The protocol sought to gain an

understanding of any prior knowledge of both personal strengths and discipleship, as well as gain an understanding of participants' knowledge and understanding after two training sessions and two months spent in the designated leadership role. The discussion that follows is the main themes discovered by the researcher through the study.

Varied Levels of Prior Knowledge and Exposure

The first main theme emerged when participants were asked to recall their top five strengths. Following the question, participants described their exposure to the StrengthsFinder assessment prior to taking the assessment. The responses showed a varied level of prior knowledge of and exposure to the assessment. The first variation was found in participants who did not know or could not remember their strengths upon being asked to recall them. The second variation was found in participants who either knew their strengths upon being asked to recall them or knew how to find them quickly. All five participants reported having no prior exposure to the StrengthsFinder assessment.

Did not know strengths. Two participants were either unable to recall their specific top five strengths or only recalled main ideas of what might have been their top strengths. Participant 1 recalled three of her top five strengths but struggled to recall the other two. Similarly, when asked about her top five strengths, Participant 3 responded:

Uhm, I don't know if they're specific to the StrengthsFinder, but I know like it's like listening, uhh, I can't remember, like, the five, it's like listening, open-mindedness . . . observer. I can't remember the last two. They might not be the specific, direct, uhm, StrengthsFinder things, but yeah.

Knew strengths. The other three participants were able to recall their specific top five strengths. In response to the question, Participant 4 was prepared and easily

recalled her top five strengths. Similarly, Participant 5 recalled his top five strengths with ease. Participant 2 recalled her top five strengths but required a bit more time: “I’m sorry, I don’t know them off the top of my head. Uhm it’s developer, belief . . . empathy, adaptability, and positivity.”

No exposure. A characteristic consistent with all participants was having no exposure to the StrengthsFinder assessment prior to taking the assessment. Participant 4 responded, “Uhm, I would say I didn’t really know anything about it. . . . I just thought it as a very interesting way to kind of identify our roles as leaders.”

Varied Levels of Change

The second main theme—varied level of change in relation to their engagement with discipleship after learning about their personal strengths—emerged as participants responded to a question assessing their level of engagement with discipleship since learning about their personal strengths. The first variation indicated no change with how participants engaged with discipleship. The second variation indicated some change, while the third variation indicated significant change with how participants engaged with discipleship after learning about their personal strengths.

No change. “No change” was represented by two participants who claimed little to no change in their engagement with discipleship. Participant 2 said she had not done much to incorporate her strengths into life, and Participant 1 claimed not experiencing a dramatic change of engagement.

Some change. One participant expressed experiencing some change in her engagement with discipleship. Participant 3 responded,

Mmm, ahh, yeah. Yes and no. I think, like, uhm, I haven't personally, like, really looked much into it, uhm, or, like, done anything, like, with it. So, like, I think maybe I could probably do better at that. But, uhm, I think it's allowed me to, like, have spaces, of, like, personal growth in that of understanding my strengths and being able to, like, know that of myself to be able to, like, uhm, to, like, help myself, uhm, like, be confident in those strengths that I do have.

Significant change. “Significant change” represented two participants who responded to the question saying that their engagement with discipleship has experienced significant change since learning about their personal strengths. Participant 4 explained, I definitely think that when I got the [StrengthsFinder results] that was, like, a big moment of me being, like, ‘Wow, that’s so spot on.’ . . . I can see that . . . [my results] so clearly resonate for me and so clearly demonstrate who I am . . . Similarly, Participant 5 experienced significant change, expressing that learning about his strengths proved helpful for knowing more about where he was weakest and for gaining an awareness that everyone is different and does not have the same strengths.

Personal Strengths Impact Relationships

The third main theme—strengths impacting relationships—emerged as participants were asked if they have noticed any of their strengths impacting the way they disciple others through the leadership role they hold. Participants expressed that their strengths have impacted how they disciple in different ways, but overall, participants expressed that their strengths impacted their discipleship in three similar ways: (1) ability to be present with others; (2) engagement in conversations with those around them; and (3) support and encouragement for others.

Presence. The concept of presence and being with others was a significant overall theme for three participants. Participant 2 referenced experiencing the strength of Empathy at work in her daily life:

. . . I do see [empathy] play out a lot, where I'm just able to sit and listen to someone and just really try to be there for them and try to understand where they're coming from and understand, like, what they're going through. . . . I've see that help a lot in a role as [Discipleship Assistant].

Similarly, Participant 3 relied on her ability to sit with others, engage in listening, and not just give advice. Presence was not the only way participants reported seeing strengths impact their discipleship; the impact emerged in conversations with those around them.

Conversation. Three participants reported an impact in the way they were having conversations with others in light of learning more about their strengths. Participant 3 reported being much more aware of how she interacts with others, such as helping to guide conversations that are sincere and honor the Lord. Participant 2 recalled experiencing the Developer strength at work and impacting conversations with others when she would talk with her roommate, explaining to her that she has so much potential and bringing an awareness to where that potential was on display in her everyday life. Participant 1, who recalled having the Developer strength as well, experienced impact in the way she asks questions in conversations:

I think I definitely, uhm, like, am intentional about asking people questions if I see something in them that either is something that I think they have, like, immense potential for growth or something that they might not be seeing. . .

Not only did the participants report experiencing the impact of strengths in their conversations with others, but participants also reported their strengths impacting the way they provide support for those they serve and lead.

Providing support. Providing support was a common idea in the responses from the participants; however, the ways in which participants provided support varied.

Recalling his Restorative strength, Participant 5 expressed the ability to step in and help when people have a need. He recounted seeing the Restorative strength as a willingness to “help [people] whether it’s with, like, some spiritual question or just, like, a homework problem that they don’t understand.” Providing support took on a different role for Participant 4, who referenced her strength of Positivity:

Positivity has been something that I’m really focusing on and I love to make people laugh on my wing and I didn’t really, like, I always tried to be happy, but this year I can, like, really see how important that is to me and . . . being there for the [people] around me . . . just kind of being there for them in, like, a happy way.

In various ways, participants expressed how their personal StrengthsFinder results impacted how they disciple others through the leadership position they serve in. In addition to these responses, participants expressed a certain level of value that exists in the StrengthsFinder assessment as a final major theme of the study.

Personal Strengths are Valuable

The final theme—StrengthsFinder assessment as valuable—emerged from the data when participants were asked if they had anything additional to share. Three participants expressed value in the StrengthsFinder assessment in both a team dynamic and for self-awareness.

Team dynamic. Participant 1 spoke to the value that she received from taking and engaging with the StrengthsFinder assessment. She said, “. . . I enjoyed taking the test and I think it’s . . . valuable in, uhm, seeing the relationship between [Resident Assistants’] and [Discipleship Assistants’] StrengthsFinder results . . . taking into account as you work together as a team.”

Self-awareness. Self-awareness was another common thread through the responses as two participants reflected on their perceived value of the StrengthsFinder assessment. Participant 2 reflected,

. . . thinking about the [StrengthsFinder] . . . it just gives you so much understanding for yourself and, like, the ways that you, through the StrengthsFinder, like, just helps you understand, like, how you can better serve others and, like, the areas where you are capable to serve them better.

Further, Participant 2 added that the StrengthsFinder assessment provides understanding to who people are and is helpful to love and serve others. With a different perspective, Participant 4 recalled that she was “really impacted” by the StrengthsFinder assessment, claiming that the assessment results were “so spot on” to who she is and that she could understand and utilize the results to relate to others.

Conclusion

This study sought to answer the question, “Does an understanding of an individual’s personal strengths impact the way they engage with the discipleship process?” After examining the major themes, as well as supporting concepts, an overall essence of the study emerged: though there are varied degrees of understanding personal strengths, value still exists in knowing and understanding personal strengths, and, as a

result, there is varied impact of engagement with the discipleship process. This essence is explored further in the next chapter as the researcher examines how the findings contribute to answering the overall research question.

Chapter 5

Discussion

This research explored the question, “Does an understanding of an individual’s personal strengths impact the way they engage with the discipleship process?” The qualitative phenomenological study utilized individual interviews to identify themes in order to answer the question presented. Overall, the study found that while levels of knowledge and understanding of personal strengths varied, an impact on engagement with the discipleship process remained evident. This chapter provides further discussion on the findings and explores implications for practice and further research. Additionally, this chapter addresses limitations that existed within the study.

Discussion of the Findings

The four main themes discovered through the interviews expressed the overall idea that understanding the StrengthsFinder assessment has varying degrees of impact on engagement with discipleship for the participants of this study. The four themes were as follows: (1) varied levels of prior knowledge and exposure to the StrengthsFinder assessment; (2) varied levels of change exist in understanding of discipleship after learning about personal strengths; (3) personal strengths impact relationship with others; and (4) personal strengths seen as valuable for self-awareness. The discussion below offers connections between the four themes and previous research, as well as an exploration of implications for further research and limitations of the study.

Varied levels of prior knowledge and exposure. The participants in this study took part in what Buckingham and Clifton (2001) would classify as experiential knowledge, an essential part to understanding personal strengths. The participants obtained knowledge of the StrengthsFinder assessment through taking the assessment and participating in two training sessions that provided additional insight. However, Buckingham and Clifton (2001) claimed that individuals need to apply discipline if they are to retain new knowledge. This claim is important to the overall results of this study. It is important for individuals who take the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment to desire a level of discipline when learning more about their personal strengths, because it is out of this space that this new knowledge can more greatly impact their lives and, in the case of this study, impact engagement with the discipleship process. Participants in the study shared varying levels of knowledge of the StrengthsFinder assessment when asked to recall their top five strengths in an individual interview, which could suggest a varying level of discipline concerning how the participants learned about and implemented their personal strengths into everyday life.

Two participants were either unable to recall their specific top five strengths or only recalled main ideas of what they thought their strengths might be. The other three participants recalled their top five strengths when asked. Overall, the two participants who struggled to recall their top five strengths also struggled to recall direct ways they experienced their strengths impacting the way they engaged with discipleship through their leadership roles. On the other hand, the three participants who recalled their top five strengths spoke more directly to how they experienced their top five strengths impacting the way they engaged with discipleship through their leadership roles. The

participants with a greater understanding and knowledge of their personal strengths saw more clearly how their skills and talents worked with their new knowledge to “provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity” (Winseman et al., 2008, p. 7).

Varied levels of change. Participants expressed varying levels of change with how they understand their engagement with discipleship after learning more about their personal strengths. Two participants indicated no change; one participant expressed some change, and two participants explained experiencing significant change in their engagement with discipleship. The experience of the two who noted significant change coincides with the claim by Clifton and Harter (2003) that individuals gain more when they build on their strengths. The two participants expressing significant change were two of the three participants recalled their top five strengths and provided direct ways they experienced their strengths at work in their respective leadership roles. It is significant to see that the participants who were able to recall their strengths, which represents a level of knowledge and understanding, also experience a significant change in the way they engage in discipleship, leading closer to a conclusion that an understanding of personal strengths can impact the discipleship process.

Personal strengths impact relationships. During the individual interviews, all five participants expressed understanding discipleship to involve some level of relational or community-based aspects. This understanding became clear in how the participants noted experiencing their personal strengths at work in their leadership positions that are heavily discipleship-based. Participants expressed their strengths impacting the way they were present with others, engaged in conversations with others, and provided support and encouragement for others. Herman (2008) viewed discipleship as a process in which

growing Christians assist one another in their knowledge and experience of Jesus Christ, in the context of personal relationships.

Clifton and Anderson (2004) claimed that leadership is an influential relationship between two or more people, designed to produce real change. The participants of the study experienced an understanding of their strengths leading to impactful relationships. Participants expressed an understanding of their strengths impacting their presence with others, as well as experiencing real change in how they engaged in conversations with people whom they have relationships. In addition, participants were able to utilize their knowledge of strengths to encourage others and provide support for those in need.

Personal strengths are valuable. Three participants noted value exists with the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment, both within a group setting and individually. For the two participants who expressed individual value, they focused on the self-awareness that the StrengthsFinder assessment provided. Soria et al. (2015) stated that enhancing self-awareness is at the core of a strengths-based approach to learning, as it provides individuals with insights into their unique combination of strengths. Similarly, Clifton and Anderson (2004) reasoned that leaders are people who know their strengths and acknowledge who people are, including the strengths they bring. The participants of the study found value in the StrengthsFinder assessment for the ways it enhanced their self-awareness and provided a more enriched understanding of others in group settings.

In considering the participants who expressed their strengths impacting relationships with others—specifically in conversations with others—the participants recalled conversations in which they were able to acknowledge the strengths of their peers and how they (the participants) were able to work with and walk alongside them in

new ways. Our lives are shaped by our interactions with those around us (Rath & Clifton, 2009), and the participants of this study reflected an impact in how they engaged in relationship with others after learning about their personal strengths.

Implications for Practice

The information collected from the study could significantly improve campus discipleship programs. The results indicate that, as individuals become aware of and gain knowledge of their personal strengths, it impacts the way they engage in relationships with those around them, and these impacted relationships are central to the discipleship process. Christian colleges and universities that wish to implement the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment into discipleship programs can expect it to impact the way their students understand themselves and their relationships. This knowledge could create space for students to engage with the discipleship process in a new way—a way that highlights their unique gifts and talents.

A second significant implication for Christian colleges and universities to consider is how the Clifton StrengthsFinder would provide the students who take it with an opportunity to learn more about themselves and gain a greater self-awareness. While the assessment could be implemented among discipleship programming, it could very easily be implemented across the board for any leadership training. As many Christian colleges and universities claim a desire to foster spiritual formation and discipleship among their students, an assessment such as the Clifton StrengthsFinder that creates space for learning self-awareness could be an opportunity to begin or continue the discipleship process among students.

A third and final implication for Christian colleges and universities could be the opportunity that the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment provides for conversations surrounding growth and learning. If implemented into discipleship programming or campus mentorship programming, the Clifton StrengthsFinder would provide interesting dialogue between discipler and disciple, or mentor and mentee. The results from the study indicate that the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment had significant impact on conversations with others, so implementing the assessment into these specific areas could greatly impact the conversations and relationships.

Implications for Further Research

Research regarding the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment is numerous, and, while research regarding discipleship is common, it is primarily within the church context. Very little research exists on the combination of the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment and discipleship and specifically when considering how each might be used to benefit the other. Understanding the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment would be of great value and impact for those involved in the local church, but equally important is research that specifically explores how the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment impacts college and university discipleship programs.

Many Christian colleges and universities have discipleship programs on their campuses to assist students' spiritual formation. From current research, the Clifton StrengthsFinder offers many benefits to individuals and groups who seek to understand and gain knowledge about it. Research with a focus on further bridging the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment and college and university discipleship programs could benefit campuses greatly in their pursuit of assisting students' spiritual formation.

Lastly, this topic would benefit greatly from further research focused on graduates of Christian colleges and universities who experienced the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment during their time attending college. It would be interesting to see if, once they have graduated, the students continue to experience an impact on how they engage with the discipleship process with a knowledge and understanding of their personal strengths. Depending on what this research would yield, it could provide additional insights into what Christian colleges and universities do well and what could use improvement in preparing students for post-graduation discipleship.

Limitations

As is typical in any research pursuit, this study had a few limitations. For example, the number of individuals who participated in an interview was a small selection of the larger group of student leaders involved in the two campus-wide training sessions that took place prior to the interviews. Therefore, the results may not be representative of the entire student leader population.

Second, the individual interviews were the first time the protocol had been utilized. The researcher created the protocol based on research conducted in the literature to gain a clearer understanding of the potential impact of understanding personal strengths on the discipleship process. While the researcher conducted a pilot study using the created protocol prior to the individual interviews, it was the first time the protocol was used for the study, meaning it may not be as valid or reliable as a protocol used in previous studies.

A final limitation to the study was the lack of a summer intervention between StrengthsFinder training sessions. The researcher had planned to create an activity or

curriculum to be utilized during the summer between the two training sessions (one session that was held in the fall and one the next spring). The summer intervention would have provided continued learning for student leaders regarding their personal strengths. In addition, it could have helped them understand how they might be able to maximize their strengths in their leadership position. However, due to time constraints and logistical reasons, a summer intervention did not occur.

Conclusion

The Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment has remarkably impacted the world and continues to influence the way educators, businesspersons, politicians, doctors, students, and leaders engage with themselves and the world around them. Similarly, discipleship has had a remarkable impact on the world. From the moment when Christ gave the final commission to go into all the world, discipleship has been the Church's way of influencing educators, doctors, pastors, students, and leaders to engage with themselves and the world around them as they strive to make a difference for the Kingdom. The moment we choose to engage our innate gifts and abilities, as well as our call to make disciples, is the moment we fully live into the purpose for which we have been created.

The essence of this study brings to light the impact that understanding personal strengths has on the ways we engage in the discipleship process. The participants in the study experienced first-hand the impact a greater understanding of their strengths had on their discipleship process—they witnessed its impact on how they engaged in relationship and in discipleship with those around them. As we seek to understand what we are good at—our strengths—it impacts the way we engage and interact with the relationships around us; significantly, it impacts our discipleship process.

References

- Anderson, E. C. (2004). *What is a strengths-based education? A tentative answer from someone who strives to be a strengths-based educator*. Unpublished manuscript, Department of Doctoral Studies in Educational Leadership, Azusa Pacific University, Azusa, California. Retrieved from <https://www.weber.edu/WSUImages/leadership/docs/sq/strengths-base-ed.pdf>
- Asplund, J., Lopez S. J., Hodges, T., & Harter, J. (2007). *The Clifton StrengthsFinder 2.0 technical report: Development and validation*. Princeton, NF: The Gallup Organization.
- Bowers, K. M., & Lopez, S. J. (2010). Capitalizing on personal strengths in college. *Journal of College and Character*, 11(1), 1–11. doi:10.2202/1940-1639.1011
- Buckingham, M., & Clifton, D. O. (2001). *Now, discover your strengths*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Busteed, B., & Stutzman, J. (2015, July 28). *U.S. postgraduates have edge in lifelong learning*. Gallup News. Retrieved from <https://news.gallup.com/poll/184367/postgraduates-edge-lifelong-learning.aspx>
- Clifton, D. O., & Anderson, E. C. (2004). *Developing leadership strengths in college*. Retrieved from <http://strengths.southmountaincc.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/01/Developing-Leadership-Strengths-in-College.pdf>

- Clifton, D. O., Anderson, E. C., & Schreiner, L. A. (2006). *StrengthsQuest: Discover and develop your strengths in academics, career, and beyond*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.
- Clifton, D. O., & Harter, J. K. (2003). Investing in Strengths. In A. K. S. Cameron, B. J. E. Dutton, & C. R. E. Quinn (Eds.), *Positive organizational scholarship: Foundations of a new discipline* (pp. 111–121). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers.
- Creswell, J. W. (1998). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Boston, MA: Pearson Education.
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Creswell, J. W., & Guetterman, T. C. (2019). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research*. Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Evans, N. J., Forney, D. S., Guido, F. M., Patton, L. D., & Renn, K. A. (2010). *Student development in college: Theory, research, and practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Gallup. (n.d.). Retrieved from <https://www.gallupstrengthscenter.com/>
- Herman, H. A. (2008). *Discipleship by design: The discipling of Christian university students*. Maitland, FL: Xulon Press.

- Hull, B. (2006). *The complete book of discipleship: On being and making followers of Christ*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
- Louis, M. C. (2012). *The Clifton StrengthsFinder and student strengths development*. Omaha, NE: The Gallup Organization.
- Rath, T. (2007). *StrengthsFinder 2.0*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.
- Rath, T. (2008). *Strengths based leadership: Great leaders, teams, and why people follow*. New York, NY: Gallup Press
- Rath, T., & Clifton, D. O. (2009). *How full is your bucket?* New York, NY: Gallup Press.
- Schreiner, L. A. (2006). *A technical report on the clifton strengthsfinder with college students*. CliftonStrengths for Students. Retrieved from <https://www.strengthsquest.com/192485/technical-report-clifton-strengthsfinder-college-students.aspx>
- Seemiller, C. (2017). Using leadership competencies to develop talents into strengths. *New Directions for Student Leadership*, 2017(156), 31–42. doi:10.1002/yd.20269
- Soria, K. M., Roberts, J. E., & Reinhard, A. P. (2015). First-year college students' strengths awareness and perceived leadership development. *Journal of Student Affairs Research and Practice*, 52(1), 89–103. doi:10.1080/19496591.2015.996057
- van Manen, M. (1990). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Wilkins, M. J. (1992). *Following the Master*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House.

Winseman, A. L., Clifton, D. O., & Liesveld, C. (2008). *Living your strengths: Discover your God-given talents and inspire your community*. New York, NY: Gallup Press.

Appendix A

Individual Interview Questions

1. What are your top five strengths?
2. How would you describe your exposure to strengths prior to taking the strengths assessment?
 - a. Please explain.
3. Did the strengths training sessions, both last spring and this fall, help you understand your strengths better?
 - a. Please explain.
4. Can you explain your engagement with discipleship prior to beginning your role as DA?
5. Can you explain your understanding of discipleship since beginning your role as DA?
6. Has your engagement with discipleship changed since learning about your strengths?
 - a. If so, how?
7. Have you noticed your specific strengths impacting the way you disciple others through your role?
 - a. If so, how?

8. Are there any of your top five strengths in which you have seen more at work in your role as DA?
 - a. If so, which ones? And how?
9. Have you done any additional learning on your own post the training sessions about your strengths?
 - a. Why or why not?
10. Is there anything additional you would like to share?

Appendix B

Informed Consent

CONSENT TO BE PART OF A RESEARCH STUDY

Title of the Project: Impact of StrengthsFinder on Discipleship

Principal Investigator: Jacob Gerding, Graduate Student, Taylor University

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Kelly Yordy, Assistant Professor of Higher Education, Taylor University

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be a current Discipleship Assistant at Taylor University living in a residence hall. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Important Information about the Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to discover if understanding the StrengthsFinder assessment has an impact on the discipleship process. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview. This will take approximately an hour.
- Risks or discomforts from this research are equivalent to those that students would expect to encounter in daily life. No other risks of any kind are anticipated.
- The study will provide insight to what impact, if any, an understanding of the StrengthsFinder assessment has on the discipleship process.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You don't have to participate and you can stop at any time.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is discover if there is an impact on discipleship by understanding the StrengthsFinder assessment. Additionally, the purpose is to see if there is benefit to including the Clifton StrengthsFinder assessment into training for university campus discipleship.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one-on-one interview. We expect this to take about an hour and occur only once.

How could you benefit from this study?

You might benefit from being in this study because you might have the opportunity to verbally process how the StrengthsFinder assessment may impact your view of discipleship.

What risks might result from being in this study?

The researcher doesn't believe there are any risks from participating in this research.

How will we protect your information?

The researcher plans to publish the results of this study. To protect your privacy, the researcher will not include any information that could directly identify you.

The researcher will protect the confidentiality of your research records by storing them on a password protected computer. Your name and any other information that can directly identify you will be stored separately from the data collected as part of the project.

It is possible that other people may need to see the information we collect about you. These people work for Taylor University and government offices that are responsible for making sure the research is done safely and properly.

The researcher acknowledges that confidentiality is ensured by the researcher.

What will happen to the information we collect about you after the study is over?

Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be kept secure and stored separately from the research data collected as part of the project.

The researcher may remove the identifiers and the de-identified research information about you may be used for future research without additional consent from you.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

It is totally up to you to decide to participate in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, the researcher will remove your information and any provided data.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have questions about this research, you may contact **Jacob Gerding**,
jacob_gerding@taylor.edu OR **Dr. Kelly Yordy**, **klyordy@taylor.edu**

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Taylor University Institutional Review Board
 236 West Reade Avenue
 Upland, Indiana 46989
 Phone: (765) 998-5188 or toll free, (800) 882-3456 Email: irb@taylor.edu

Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. The researcher will give you a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.

 Printed Subject Name

 Signature

 Date

Consent to be Audio/video Recorded

I agree to be audio/video recorded

YES _____ **NO** _____

 Signature

 Date

