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Students Who Frequently Use Their Signature Strengths Earn Higher Marks, but this Effect Depends on the Level of Strengths-Course Fit

Phillip A. Ianni¹, Kenneth E. Hart¹, and Tyler M. Carey²

¹University of Windsor, Ontario, Canada, ²University of Victoria, British Columbia, Canada

INTRODUCTION: Park & Peterson (2007) have applied the strengths-of-character paradigm in Positive Psychology to understanding academic achievement. Students were found to earn higher marks if they more frequently made use their “signature strengths” in approaching their coursework. As an extension of this research, the present study predicted that the effect size of the association between strengths utilization and GPA would be greater among students who perceived a high (as opposed to a low) degree of fit between their strengths and their courses. **METHOD:** 219 University students enrolled in a Positive Psychology course were studied at the end of the Fall semester of 2010, after they had completed an 8-week version of Gallup’s StrengthsQuest program. Students reported the degree to which they felt their courses matched their strengths. Semester GPA was determined by using data from the University Registrar. **RESULTS:** 3 regressions were conducted in which prior semester GPA served as a covariate. For the entire sample, the frequency of Strengths Utilization accounted for 6% of the residual variance in GPA. Among students who reported high Strengths-Course fit, frequency of Strengths Utilization accounted for 15% of the variance in GPA. As predicted, no effect was found among students who reported low Strengths-Course fit. **DISCUSSION:** University initiatives designed to bolster academic performance should consider encouraging students to “play to their strengths” more often. To optimize the salutary impact of these initiatives, we suggest that they be engineered in a way that helps students realize how their strengths match or fit their courses.

Methodology/Measures Used:

Frequency of Strengths Utilization

PREDICTOR VARIABLE: To assess ‘Frequency of Strengths Utilization’ (FSU: our predictor variable), we used a single-item measure that asked students about how often, during the Fall semester of 2010, they used their dominant talent/strength in the academic domain of their life (“Did you use any of your signature strengths in your academic schoolwork?”). This item was rated on a 3-item scale with options of “no”, “yes, sometimes”, and “yes, often”). It should be noted that this item was part of a larger questionnaire that assessed Strengths Utilization across four additional life domains: e.g. work, personal relationships, spiritual life, emotional wellbeing. To date (July, 2011) we have not performed any statistical analyses on Strengths Use in the four non-academic domains that we asked about. It should also be noted students Strengths Use measure was administered in December at the end of the Fall semester of 2010. Students who responded were enrolled in my Positive Psychology class. Earlier in the semester, for purposes of course credit, students had completed Gallup’s StrengthsFinder and had pursued an 8-week strengths development program using StrengthsQuest as their guide.

Current Academic Achievement

OUTCOME VARIABLE: To measure ‘Current Academic Achievement’ (CAA: current semester GPA, our outcome variable) for the Fall semester of 2010, we obtained information about grades for all courses taken from the University Registrar’s Office. Our measure, then, was an aggregate GPA. This was computed as the mean of all courses taken. This was not a self-report. Grades were converted to the University of Windsor’s 13-point GPA scale (where 13 = A+ and 0 = F-), which was used to calculate a mean score for each student.

Previous Academic Achievement

COVARIATE: To assess ‘Previous Academic Achievement’ (PAA: past semester GPA, our covariate), we asked students the following question: “What was your grade average during your most recent year of college or university?” Students responded to this question by choosing one of five response options (A-range, B-range, C-range, D-range, or F-range).

Course-Strengths Fit

MODERATOR VARIABLE: To assess “Course-Strengths Fit” (CSF: our moderating variable), we asked students to rate how well each of their courses fit their strengths. Students specified the names and course codes of all courses they were currently taking. On a course by course basis, they then rated each course in terms of how well it fit their dominant talents/strengths. For each course they were currently enrolled in, students completed the following fit item: “To what extent do you believe there was a good fit or match between your strengths, skills and interests and this course?” Students responded on a five-point Likert scale, which had anchors of “Very poor fit” to “Very good fit”. Course-Strengths Fit was calculated as a mean of each student’s course-strengths fit for each of their courses. For example, if student took 5 courses in the semester, they answered the same question for each of their 5 courses.