What is CliftonStrengths?
Grounded in positive psychology, CliftonStrengths is an assessment that helps people discover what they naturally do best and learn how to develop their greatest talents. Instead of focusing on weaknesses or areas that need improvement, positive psychology focuses on “what is right with the individual. Areas of scholarly contributions focus on topics such as hope, optimism, happiness, and well-being” (Stebleton, Soria, & Albecker, 2012, p. 2). The CliftonStrengths finder measures the presence of 34 general items identifying naturally recurring patterns of thoughts, feelings, or behaviors that can be productively applied to daily life. At the completion of the assessment, one’s Top 5 talents, known as Strengths, are revealed. Every person possesses all 34 Strengths, but the Top 5 are the talents that are the most innate and dominant. Understanding, owning, and applying one’s Top 5 can lead to higher levels of well-being, engagement, productivity, and life satisfaction (www.gallupstrengthscenter.com).

Why does Strengths matter?
As over 600 college campuses have adopted the principles of Strengths, research has been conducted to reveal whether or not the Strengths philosophy has positively impacted students. Employing a Strengths model can benefit students in multiple life arenas, including academic major and career-decision making, improved self-awareness and self-confidence, improved relationships, and personal success. Ultimately, identifying, developing, and applying one’s Strengths can lead to increased thriving and well-being, not just for students, but for university employees as well.

Anderson (2006) explains that Strengths-based programs can improve engagement and retention, if students can discover and apply their Strengths, they will be more focused on both academic and career goals. A Strengths-based study on first-year students indicates that “a curriculum based on strengths positively impacts students’ awareness of their strengths, a factor that, in turn, has positive implications for students’ majors, career choices, and future expectation” (Stebleton et al., 2012, p. 5). Soria and Stubblefield (2015) cite research explaining a “strong association between students’ sense of belonging and their retention at the institution” (p. 354). Soria and Stubblefield’s (2015) own research concluded that students were also more likely to appreciate differences in others, value collaboration and teamwork, have higher levels of self-awareness and confidence, feel more connected to campus, and were more likely to be retained for a second year.

Many large, four-year public institutions have successfully implemented Strengths Centers on their campuses, notably University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Kansas State University, and University of Minnesota. Public data from the University of Minnesota’s two-year pilot program indicated that Strengths awareness was positively, indirectly associated with students’ retention, GPA, self-reported sense of belonging, self-awareness, career decision efficacy, and campus engagement. It is time for WMU to join this movement and create a culture that values Strengths.

Purpose and importance of this project
The purpose of this project is to build on the Year 1 pilot that was launched in Fall 2017. Twenty-two First-Year Seminar (FYS) instructors self-identified to participate in the first pilot year. With one-time dollars from the Associate Provost of Enrollment Management, 500 codes were purchased for students in seminars with Strengths activities. During the course of the semester, these students took the Strengths assessment, had a classroom facilitation by a trained Strengths Champion, and completed three in-class activities that further developed their understanding of their Strengths.

However, because students need 24 Strengths touchpoints over the course of the four years (Gallup, 2017) to truly understand and internalize their Strengths, one semester of Strengths activities is not enough to make a tremendous impact. It is, however, a great starting point for new students to be introduced to their Strengths, and a necessary stage for WMU to develop a culture of Strengths. Furthermore, as the Success at WMU initiative takes flight, mentor groups will provide an ideal setting to include these touchpoints. Mentors can be trained in Strengths language and can be provided with guided conversations to help students further understand and apply their Strengths. If students learn the language of Strengths in their FYS classes, then continue those conversations with their peer mentors, it will enhance their awareness of how to apply Strengths to different areas of their lives. When students gain this awareness and intentionally develop
their Strengths, it has the potential to improve their well-being and thriving quotient (The Thriving Project, 2017). Thriving students equals a thriving campus.

To continue to introduce students to their Strengths, and to keep this conversation moving forward at a university level, more funding is needed to purchase codes for another subset of FYS sections for Fall 2018. This second year pilot will be referred to as Pilot 2.0, and the Fall 2017 semester will be called Pilot 1.0. We learned a great deal through Pilot 1.0 and if funding is successful, will make changes to improve the administration of the Strengths activities. We will continue to maintain contact with Pilot 1.0 students as they return for their second year, and will develop an advisory board to discuss how to integrate more Strengths touchpoints into their collegiate life as they matriculate. Running Pilot 2.0 will allow us to collect more data, as well as improve the effectiveness of how Strengths activities are administered in a classroom. Continuing the Strengths conversation and awareness in FYS courses contributes to the development of a Strengths culture at WMU, and creating a foundation of Strengths within Success at WMU will support broader implementation. Additionally, the mission to create a Strengths-based campus aligns with the university’s Gold Standard 2020 strategic plan, specifically complimenting Goal #1 under Learner Success.

**Learning outcomes**

1. Students will be able to articulate why they are learning about their Strengths and can name their Top 5 Strengths.

2. Students will be able to articulate how increased self-knowledge can help them in specific areas of their life and studies.

3. Students will be able to describe how they can apply their knowledge about their top five strengths to help them succeed in school and relationships.

**Implementation plan**

First-year seminar instructors will again have the opportunity to self-select into Pilot 2.0 for Fall 2018. Four hundred codes will be purchased and distributed to the students in these sections. An in-class presentation will happen after students have taken the assessment, and Strengths Champions will be scheduled to visit the classes to conduct Strengths activities and discussions. Students will be encouraged, and some may be required, to complete an individual Strengths coaching session. One final Strengths activity will be conducted at the end of the semester, allowing students to demonstrate their awareness and learning of Strengths concepts. Instructors will be asked to have students complete short reflection papers with structured prompts regarding awareness, engagement, and interpersonal relationships. This periodic formative assessment will indicate how well students are achieving the learning outcomes. The co-investigators will collect and read through this qualitative data. Completed activity worksheets will also be collected as artifacts and analyzed as a direct measure of learning.

Focus groups with Pilot 2.0 students will be conducted at the end of Fall 2018 and Spring 2019 semesters to assess how deeply students understand their Strengths and the value of this knowledge. A focus group of pilot instructors will be conducted early in the Spring 2019 semester to understand the value from the instructor’s perspective, as well as to understand how implementation can be improved.

While Pilot 2.0 is conducted in FYS classes, advisory board members will make recommendations on how to best integrate Strengths practices into existing services and activities, providing additional touchpoints and support for Pilot 1.0 students during their second year.

**Assessment methods and data analysis**

The assessment of Pilot 2.0 will model that of Pilot 1.0 and focus on measuring the following:

**Impact on retention:** Is there a difference in retention to fall 2019 between students who participated in FYS with Strengths curriculum and those in FYS with a standard curriculum?

**Impact on academic performance:** Is there a difference in GPA between students who participated in FYS with Strengths and those in FYS with a standard curriculum?

**Impact on self-knowledge/strengths awareness:** Is there a difference in self-knowledge/strengths awareness before and
after Strengths-based FYS? Is there a difference in self-knowledge/strengths awareness between students in Strengths-based FYS and standard FYS, before or after the course?

**Relationship between self-knowledge and engagement:** Is there a relationship between students’ self-knowledge and their engagement?

**Relationship between self-knowledge and career readiness:** Is there a relationship between students’ self-knowledge and their career readiness?

All FYS students will take a pre-test and post-test, administered online through Campus Labs. The instrument was developed based on previous research, with items on strengths awareness (Anderson, 2003), items on engagement (developed based on Soria and Stubblefield, 2014), and items on career readiness (developed based on NACE career readiness competencies). The pre-test will be sent to students at the beginning of the semester before students in the pilot receive their Strengths codes. The email invitation with a personalized link to complete the survey will be sent by Career Services but it will appear as coming from individual instructors. The post-test will be sent to students at the end of the semester, following the same procedure as the pre-test. Additionally, Strengths Champions who conduct in-class activities will collect brief feedback papers after each session, providing qualitative data for formative assessment. The formative assessments will be used to evaluate how well the learning outcomes are being reached as the semester progresses, in addition to deeper reflection papers assigned by the instructors.

At the conclusion of the fall semester, data analysis will be run between pre and post-tests and between control and pilot FYS sections, combing for variances that may be attributed to the Strengths intervention. Qualitative data from worksheets, reflection papers and focus groups will be analyzed and contribute to the findings. While the pre and post-tests may show only small variances between pilot and control groups, the thick, rich descriptions gained from qualitative data will round out the discoveries of the value of this initiative. Furthermore, retention and GPA tracking for Pilot 1.0 students will also contribute to the data collected. A final report will be composed, evaluating all data collected from both Pilot 1.0 and 2.0.

While there was minimal statistical significance in the findings between the pre and post-tests between the pilot and control groups for Pilot 1.0, there were gains made on a few of the items, including students being able to name their Top 5 Strengths; gaining self-awareness and how their Strengths impacts their relationships; increasing a sense of belonging at WMU; participating in extracurricular activities; positively increasing their perception of their own communication skills and work habits, and being able to work effectively with others. Because there are many variables that can contribute to the positive increase in these factors, it will be necessary to gain more qualitative feedback via deeper reflection papers and focus groups for the next pilot. Additional qualitative data for Pilot 2.0 will contribute valuable insight into the impact of Strengths awareness on the items measured on the assessment.

**Dissemination**

The final report for Pilot 2.0 will be shared with FYS pilot instructors, administrators, and vested staff by May 31, 2019 by the principle investigator. The results gained will inform further practice improvement. To become a Strengths-based campus, students, faculty, staff, and administrators need to have these conversations across all disciplines and all units. A second year of pilot implementation will help fine-tune how Strengths activities can most effectively be administered in a classroom setting. Reaching students in a classroom, where there is a target audience and intentional on-going conversation, reflection, and assessment will continue to propel WMU to becoming a Strengths-based campus. Approximately 400 new students will be impacted by this grant. That is 400 more students who will develop deeper self-awareness. This self-awareness will help them tap into their greatest potential and will facilitate positive growth and development. As a result, thriving, engaged students will be retained.

**Budget**

The sole purpose of these funds is to purchase additional Strengths codes at $10 per code. The maximum amount of this grant received will purchase codes for 400 students, or approximately 20 FYS sections.
**Timeline**

If funding is successful, codes will be purchased prior to the start of the Fall 2018 semester. Codes will be distributed to pilot instructors the first week of the semester, and the pre-test will be sent to FYS students at this time. In-class presentations will take place during September, with subsequent Strengths activities following in October, November, and December. The post-test will be available to take the first two weeks of December. Pilot 1.0 students’ retention and GPA will be tracked at the end of Spring 2018, start of Fall 2018, start of Spring 2019, and end of Spring 2019. Data analysis will take place during the Spring 2019 semester, with the final report ready by May 31, 2019.

**A Strengths-based campus**

Many departments across campus see the value of Strengths and are adopting Strengths-based approaches to development and engagement. A few areas that currently use Strengths are the Office of Student Transitions, Career and Student Employment Services, Office of Student Engagement, Haworth College of Business, Office of Faculty Development, College of Education and Human Development, TRiO Student Support Programs, Office of Admissions, and the Bernhard Center. All of these areas use Strengths to improve student development and well-being. The Office of Student Transitions partners with these departments to bridge collective efforts, eliminate redundancy and duplication of services, and create a stream-lined approach for not only unifying campus departments, but to also bring Strengths development to as many students as possible. Solidifying an infrastructure that promotes a program of excellence will allow us to infuse Strengths practices into Success at WMU, expanding the number of students positively impacted by Strengths.

This initiative will not be accomplished in one semester, one year, or even two years. Changing the culture of a campus is a multi-year endeavor and needs strong collaboration among all units. The more codes that can be purchased, the more students we can engage in Strengths development. Incorporating Strengths into classrooms is the ideal setting due to the ability to have intentional and structured conversations, activities, and assessment to measure their learning. The more students are able to understand the value of Strengths development, the more their thriving quotient and well-being will increase, which will ultimately have a profound impact on all of campus.

**References**

Anderson, E.C. (2006). If we want to boost retention and achievement, we need to work from student strengths, not weaknesses. *About Campus*, 11(4), 4-5.


