

Validating Strengths Finder Norms for Veterinary Medical Students: A Confirmatory Study

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Abstract The Clifton Strengths Finder 2.0 is a popular online assessment that has been administered to more than 16 million people worldwide. Based on ‘strength theory’, the assessment helps individuals discern their top five strengths (called “Signature Themes”) and participants are encouraged to use the results for intra-professional development purposes. There are many implications for the use of the Strengths Finder in higher education, particularly across academic disciplines in which fields are influenced by norms, cultures and values that both attract individuals to a field and socialize them to become functional members of the disciplinary community. Previous research established Strengths Finder norms for veterinary medical students. However, a major limitation of that study pertained to its generalizability, particularly if the results largely were an artifact of student selection as determined by the college’s admissions committee. Thus, the purpose of this study was to replicate the previous study using a different sample frame selected by an entirely different admissions committee to discern if the same primary themes remain among veterinary medical students. Using descriptive statistics to determine the Signature Themes of veterinary medical students, results confirm the same Signature Themes emerge, indicating stable findings relating to the norms of veterinary medical students.

Keywords: *medical education, health professions education, veterinary education, sociology, social psychology, student attributes, academic disciplines*

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1. Introduction

The Clifton Strengths Finder 2.0 is a popular online assessment developed by Donald Clifton of the Gallup Organization and has been administered to more than 16 million people worldwide [1]. The Strengths Finder was developed using positive psychology, namely ‘strength theory’ to help participants identify their top five primary strengths. Strengths theory dictates that individuals receive greater benefit when they work to improve their existing strengths, as opposed to working to improve their current weaknesses [2].

The purpose of the StrengthsFinder is to help participants identify their greatest strengths, and once identified, encourage participants to continually use those strengths in both everyday life and work. The purpose, therefore, is purely intra-professional development for the participant. However, the StrengthsFinder may also have implications for sociology research as many businesses and professional organizations administer the assessment to their employees. Further, the assessment is routinely administered in college and university settings and the results often are used to group students into social groups for team-based learning activities and projects.

In fact, a long history of research in higher education has noted the role of academic disciplines, specifically the norms, values and cultural associations therein [3]. Ladd and Lipset [4] said:

“A discipline’s subject matter requires a bundle of professional work experience, defines the group’s interests which serve as points of reference and association, and seems to attract people of particular value orientation; together these factors contribute to the formation of distinctive discipline subcultures. And once formed, such subcultures apparently become more than the sum of their contributing parts. A set of characteristics, styles, concerns, values, traditions, and general orientation to the social and political world takes shape, and members of the discipline are in intellectual contact with it throughout their professional lives” (p. 69).

To that end, Royal and colleagues published an important paper in 2018 in which the authors established Strengths Finder norms for veterinary medical students and created a normative framework for other health professions education researchers to compare students’ “Signature Themes” [5]. One question that remained from Royal and colleagues’ work, however, was whether the findings were generalizable across veterinary student

populations, or if the results largely were an artifact of student selection as determined by the college's admissions committee. Thus, the purpose of this study was to replicate the previous study using a different sample frame selected by an entirely different admissions committee to discern if the same primary themes remain among veterinary medical students.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and Setting

All incoming veterinary medical students for the class of 2023 were administered the Strengths Finder prior to student orientation. All 100 students completed the Strengths Finder assessment resulting in a 100% response rate. With respect to gender, 89 (89%) students identified as female and 11 (11%) as male. With respect to race/ethnicity, 69 (69%) students identified as White and 31 (31%) as Other. The university's Institutional Review Board (IRB) declared the study 'Exempt'.

2.2. Instrumentation

The Strengths Finder is a well-validated assessment administered by the Gallup organization [6]. The instrument consists of 177 items and participants are allotted 20 seconds to answer each question. The instrument identifies participants' top five "Signature Themes", or primary strengths among 34 different themes. At the conclusion of the assessment participants are made aware of their top five "Signature Themes" and offered feedback about each strength.

2.3. Analysis

The Strengths Finder presents participants with their top five "Signature Themes". Each of the five themes is presented in order of decreasing magnitude with the first theme being the most dominant, the second theme being the second most dominant theme, and so on. For the present study, counts and percents of the top five theme among veterinary medical students were produced. SPSS statistical software (version 24) was used to calculate the descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Signature Themes of the Class of 2023 Cohort

Theme	Description	N	%
Learner	People strong in the Learner theme have a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve. In particular, the process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them.	50	50.00
Achiever	People strong in the Achiever theme have a great deal of stamina and work hard. They take great satisfaction from being busy and productive.	49	49.00
Input	People strong in the Input theme have a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information.	34	34.00
Responsibility	People strong in the Responsibility theme take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty.	29	29.00
Relator	People who are strong in the Relator theme enjoy close relationships with others. They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal.	24	24.00
Restorative	People strong in the Restorative theme are adept at dealing with problems. They are good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it.	24	24.00
Positivity	People strong in the Positivity theme have an enthusiasm that is contagious. They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do.	23	23.00
Harmony	People strong in the Harmony theme look for consensus. They don't enjoy conflict; rather, they seek areas of agreement.	22	22.00
Empathy	People strong in the Empathy theme can sense the feelings of other people by imagining themselves in others' lives or others' situations.	19	19.00
Discipline	People strong in the Discipline theme enjoy routine and structure. Their world is best described by the order they create.	18	18.00
Analytical	People strong in the Analytical theme search for reasons and causes. They have the ability to think about all the factors that might affect a situation.	16	16.00
Developer	People strong in the Developer theme recognize and cultivate the potential in others. They spot the signs of each small improvement and derive satisfaction from these improvements.	16	16.00
Futuristic	People strong in the Futuristic theme are inspired by the future and what could be. They inspire others with their visions of the future.	16	16.00
Intellection	People strong in the Intellection theme are characterized by their intellectual activity. They are introspective and appreciate intellectual discussions.	16	16.00
Woo	People strong in the Woo theme love the challenge of meeting new people and winning them over. They derive satisfaction from breaking the ice and making a connection with another person.	15	15.00
Individualization	People strong in the Individualization theme are intrigued with the unique qualities of each person. They have a gift for figuring out how people who are different can work together productively.	14	14.00
Focus	People strong in the Focus theme can take a direction, follow through, and make the corrections necessary to stay on track. They prioritize, then act.	10	10.00
Strategic	People strong in the Strategic theme create alternative ways to proceed. Faced with any given scenario, they can quickly spot the relevant patterns and issues.	10	10.00
Adaptability	People strong in the Adaptability theme prefer to "go with the flow." They tend to be "now" people who take things as they come and discover the future one day at a time.	9	9.00
Arranger	People strong in the Arranger theme can organize, but they also have a flexibility that complements this ability. They like to figure out how all of the pieces and resources can be arranged for maximum productivity.	9	9.00
Communication	People strong in the Communication theme generally find it easy to put their thoughts into words. They are good conversationalists and presenters.	8	8.00

Theme	Description	N	%
Ideation	People strong in the Ideation theme are fascinated by ideas. They are able to find connections between seemingly disparate phenomena.	8	8.00
Inclusiveness / Includer	People strong in the Inclusiveness theme are accepting of others. They show awareness of those who feel left out, and make an effort to include them.	8	8.00
Competition	People strong in the Competition theme measure their progress against the performance of others. They strive to win first place and revel in contests.	7	7.00
Consistency / Fairness	People strong in the Consistency theme (also called Fairness in the first Strengths Finder assessment) are keenly aware of the need to treat people the same. They try to treat everyone in the world fairly by setting up clear rules and adhering to them.	7	7.00
Significance	People strong in the Significance theme want to be very important in the eyes of others. They are independent and want to be recognized.	6	6.00
Command	People strong in the Command theme have presence. They can take control of a situation and make decisions.	5	5.00
Context	People strong in the Context theme enjoy thinking about the past. They understand the present by researching its history.	5	5.00
Deliberative	People strong in the Deliberative theme are best described by the serious care they take in making decisions or choices. They anticipate the obstacles.	5	5.00
Activator	People strong in the Activator theme can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They are often impatient.	4	4.00
Connectedness	People strong in the Connectedness theme have faith in the links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason.	4	4.00
Maximizer	People strong in the Maximizer theme focus on strengths as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something strong into something superb.	4	4.00
Belief	People strong in the Belief theme have certain core values that are unchanging. Out of these values emerges a defined purpose for their life.	3	3.00
Self-Assurance	People strong in the Self-assurance theme feel confident in their ability to manage their own lives. They possess an inner compass that gives them confidence that their decisions are right.	3	3.00

Table 2. Frequency of Signature Themes by Order

Theme	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3	Theme 4	Theme 5
Achiever	16	17	6	7	3
Activator	0	1	2	0	1
Adaptability	1	0	1	3	4
Analytical	1	3	6	1	5
Arranger	0	3	3	2	1
Belief	1	2	0	0	0
Command	1	0	2	0	2
Communication	1	3	1	1	2
Competition	1	2	2	2	0
Connectedness	0	1	1	0	2
Consistency / Fairness	0	0	3	2	2
Context	1	1	1	2	0
Deliberative	1	2	0	2	0
Developer	1	5	2	3	5
Discipline	0	7	3	4	4
Empathy	5	4	3	5	2
Focus	1	2	3	2	2
Futuristic	3	1	3	6	3
Harmony	8	3	3	6	2
Ideation	1	1	1	1	4
Inclusiveness / Includer	1	2	2	3	0
Individualization	1	1	5	4	3
Input	12	4	5	6	7
Intellection	2	4	2	1	7
Learner	14	15	10	5	6
Maximizer	0	2	0	1	1
Positivity	2	3	7	7	4
Relator	6	0	3	7	8
Responsibility	5	2	6	8	8
Restorative	6	6	6	1	5
Self-Assurance	0	0	1	0	2
Significance	3	0	0	2	1
Strategic	4	1	2	1	2
Woo	1	2	5	5	2

3. Results

Approximately half of all students had a distinct theme of 'Achiever' (50%) and 'Learner' (49%) among their top five. Approximately one-third of all students had the theme 'Input' (34%) among their top five. Approximately one-quarter of all students also had the themes 'Responsibility' (29%), 'Relator' (24%), 'Restorative' (24%) and 'Positivity' (23%). The least common themes included 'Self-Assurance' (3%), 'Belief' (3%), 'Maximizer' (4%), 'Connectedness' (4%), 'Activator' (4%), 'Deliberative' (5%), 'Context' (5%) and 'Command' (5%). A complete breakdown of results is presented in [Table 1](#) and [Table 2](#).

4. Discussion

Similar to Royal and colleagues' original study, results found the most common Signature Themes included the 'Achiever' theme and the 'Learner' theme. According to the StrengthsFinder handbook [6] the 'Achiever' theme is described as "... [people who] have a great deal of stamina and work hard. They take great satisfaction from being busy and productive". The 'Learner' theme is described as "... has a great desire to learn and want to continuously improve. In particular, the process of learning, rather than the outcome, excites them".

The next most common theme was 'Input', which is described as "hav[ing] a craving to know more. Often they like to collect and archive all kinds of information." The other most common themes included 'Responsibility' ("take psychological ownership of what they say they will do. They are committed to stable values such as honesty and loyalty."), 'Relator' ("enjoy close relationships with others. They find deep satisfaction in working hard with friends to achieve a goal."), 'Restorative' ("are adept at dealing with problems. They are good at figuring out what is wrong and resolving it"), and 'Positivity' ("have an enthusiasm that is contagious. They are upbeat and can get others excited about what they are going to do").

The least common themes included 'Self-Assurance' ("feel confident in their ability to manage their own lives. They possess an inner compass that gives them confidence that their decisions are right."), 'Belief' ("have certain core values that are unchanging. Out of these values emerges a defined purpose for their life."), 'Maximizer' ("focus on strengths as a way to stimulate personal and group excellence. They seek to transform something strong into something superb."), 'Connectedness' ("have faith in the links between all things. They believe there are few coincidences and that almost every event has a reason."), 'Activator' ("can make things happen by turning thoughts into action. They are often impatient."), 'Deliberative' ("are best described by the serious care they take in making decisions or choices. They anticipate the obstacles."), 'Context' ("enjoy thinking about the past. They understand the present by researching its

history"), and 'Command' ("have presence. They can take control of a situation and make decisions.").

Results of the present replication study using different samples obtained from different members of an admissions committee yield confirmatory results to those originally published by Royal and colleagues. The next steps for research in this line of inquiry is to learn the Signature Themes of students in other health professions programs. These findings can provide insights as to the similarities and differences between students in health professions programs, potentially identify areas in which interdisciplinary collaborations are likely to succeed/fail, and much more. We strongly encourage other health professions education researchers to report the results of their students' Strengths Finder assessments for these information purposes.

The present study does have one, albeit minor, limitations. First, the study was conducted at a single institution. Although results conducted at a single institution often are not generalizable we believe the findings in this study are. The reason is the data were collected two years after the initial data originally published by Royal and colleagues and members originally on the admissions committee were no longer members during the latest applicant selection process. Findings from this study largely refute the potential theory that results were sample-specific based on committee member composition.

5. Conclusions

Results of this replication study largely confirm the results of Royal and colleagues' previous study evaluating veterinary medical students Signature Themes based on Strengths Finder results. Health professions education researchers in other academic disciplines are encouraged to evaluate their students Signature Themes and publish the results. Findings may inform health professions educators of the key similarities and differences among students across health professions programs and may inform areas in which successful collaborations are most promising.

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