IDENTIFYING AND APPLYING STRENGTHS TO IMPROVE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF FIRST SEMESTER, HIGH RISK COLLEGE STUDENTS ATTENDING UW-BARRON COUNTY USING THE STRENGTHSFINDER® ASSESSMENT INSTRUMENT

by

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ABSTRACT

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Identifying and Applying Strengths to Improve Academic Performance of First Semester, High Risk College Students Attending UW-Barron County Using the StrengthsFinder® Assessment Instrument

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The purpose of this study is to identify and apply the strengths of high risk college students using the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment and identify their areas of motivation, coping, and receptivity to support services using the College Student Inventory (CSI) to improve academic performance during their first semester of college.

High risk college students begin their college career labeled high risk because of unsatisfactory performance in high school. Their academic challenges (weaknesses) are further identified by high school quartile ranking, ACT scores, college placement test scores, and results

of self-assessments administered at orientation. The identification of their challenges results in the students' lowered self-esteem, insecurity about their abilities, and overall negative attitudes towards education (Hootstein, 1996). By developing a method to apply identified strengths to their academics, this study will show that high risk students will have some control over their learning experience. As a result, the students will develop beliefs of increased personal control in the learning situation and increase their motivation for learning (Hootstein, 1996).

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Background Information

The University of Wisconsin-Barron County (UW-BC) is a non-residential campus that serves primarily first generation college students within the Rice Lake/Barron County area in northwestern Wisconsin. The campus is one of 13 two-year campuses within the UW Colleges located throughout the state of Wisconsin. The UW Colleges, as part of the University of Wisconsin System, share the university's overall responsibility to disseminate knowledge, expand information, enrich the culture, and to provide outreach services (UW Colleges, 2003). These activities are carried out at the UW College campuses, which collectively are the freshman-sophomore liberal arts transfer institutions of the University of Wisconsin System, entitled to offer a general education associate degree (UW Colleges, 2003). Its programs aim to provide qualified students of all ages and backgrounds with the proficiencies and breadth of knowledge that prepare them for baccalaureate and professional programs, for life-long learning, and for leadership, service, and responsible citizenship (UW Colleges, 2003).

Approximately 75% of the students at UW-BC are traditional-aged students (under 22 years of age). Students with these three characteristics (commuters, traditional aged, and first generation students) have been found to be less academically successful than those students who reside on campus, are non-traditionally aged, and have parents who attended college (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Strage et al., 2002; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Additionally, UW-BC promotes itself as an institution of access, which means that most students who have graduated from high school and taken the ACT or SAT will be considered for admission. While this is not to assume that all students at UW-BC are less academically

prepared than students at other higher education institutions, it is possible that some of these students have yet to develop appropriate college-level study skills. Many students (whether at UW-BC or any other higher education institution) struggle during their first year of college and must utilize campus resources (including learning centers, spending time with faculty, and creating a support system of students and staff members) in order to succeed academically. Finally, approximately one-third of all first year college students do not return to their original institution during the second year. One of the primary reasons for this attrition is the lack of academic success (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003; Strage et al., 2002; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989).

Recent research has focused upon supporting students who struggle academically, especially during their first year of college. Grunder and Hellmich (1996) found that students who participated in academically focused groups were more likely to achieve higher grade point averages than those who did not participate in such programs. Additional research found that students who participated in a structured, lengthy, voluntary, intervention program were removed from academic probation status earlier and received higher GPAs than students who were not involved in an intervention (Coleman & Freedman, 1996). Finally, students who dealt with stresses of college (e.g., academic difficulty) were more likely to be retained by the institution (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998; Pritchard & Wilson, 2003).

One of the student populations that UW-Barron County serves are academically disadvantaged students. These students are identified as high risk college students. Students are classified as high risk students based on their performance in high school (i.e., being placed in the lower quartile of their high school class). However, their ACT scores are also noted and they are placed into English and math courses based on the results of their UW System placement test

scores. These students are also admitted with special stipulations that they must follow during their first semester. The stipulations may include limiting enrollment to 12 credits, required enrollment in the Learning Skills and/or First Year Seminar courses, meeting with tutors in the Learning Lab, and scheduling courses with the Academic Assistance Advisor to ensure they enroll in classes that match their academic preparation.

In general, most high risk students are placed into Basic Composition (ENG 098) and Elementary Algebra (MAT 091). Both of these courses are non-degree courses where the grade and credits received in these courses are not included in the calculation of their GPA and are not applied toward the completion of the Associate of Arts and Science degree. Students are also administered the College Student Inventory (CSI) during freshmen orientation in the Fall semester. This instrument is a self-report measure that assesses the students' motivation in academics, including study habits, math/science confidence, and attitude toward educators; general coping (e.g. sociability, career closure, financial security) and receptivity to support services including academic assistance, personal counseling, and financial guidance (Retention Management System, 2001). This assessment also identifies the students' proneness to dropout, predicted academic difficulty, and receptivity to institutional help. The CSI provides recommendations that may help address the areas students have reported, but it does not indicate how their areas of strength can help them in their weak areas.

As a result of these various indicators and assessments, students begin their academic careers by having their challenges (weaknesses) further highlighted and brought directly to their attention without an emphasis on the strengths they may already possess. At UW-Barron County, there currently is no instrument used to help high risk students identify their strengths that may be applied to these areas seen as challenges or obstacles for the students to overcome.

The factors (e.g., high school rank) that are used to classify these students as high risk have been proven not to account for all of the variance in academic success (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). High school rank and ACT scores only account for 25% of the variance in GPA (Zheng et al., 2002). There are several emotional health factors that impact college GPA and retention of students (Pritchard & Wilson, 2003). Pritchard and Wilson (2003) found that students with more fatigue and lower self-esteem indicated intent to drop out, accounting for 21% of the variance. Based on these results, the ability to successfully handle emotional stresses encountered in college life was an important factor in student retention.

Instead of focusing the students' attention on their areas seen as academic challenges and short-comings, the research shows that students benefit from advice and mentoring as they assess their strengths and resources (Strage et al., 2002). This research supports the notion that students, specifically high risk students, need to be focusing on their strengths to help overcome and work on the areas that need improvement. Students' self-perceived abilities (i.e. leadership, artistic, social, and emotional ability) are significant predictors of their academic success (Zheng et al., 2002). As a result, if there was an instrument to identify the students' strengths and apply them to their academics, then success might increase. One instrument developed to identify student strengths is the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment.

StrengthsFinder® measures 34 talent themes that are recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be applied to a student's academic life (Clifton & Anderson, 2002). This instrument provides individualized learning about the student's strengths and opportunities for advisors to connect with students about their strengths. Specifically, the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) helps students discover their sense of identity and purpose through their strengths and apply them to increase academic achievement, class selection, major

selection, and career planning (Clifton & Anderson, 2002). This assessment leads each student in a discovery of his or her natural talents, and to unique and valuable insights into developing those talents into strengths. The student becomes better equipped to succeed and to make effective decisions that enable him or her to balance the demands of class work with extra-curricular activities, job, and family (Gallup Organization, 2004).

Problem Statement

High risk college students begin their college career labeled high risk because of their unsatisfactory performance in high school. Their challenges are further identified by their high school quartile ranking, ACT scores, college placement test scores, and results of self-assessments administered at orientation. The identification of their challenges results in the students' lowered self-esteem, insecurity about their abilities, and overall negative attitudes towards their education (Hootstein, 1996).

Purpose of the Study

In an attempt to shift the students' focus from their challenges, through the administration of an assessment instrument, this study will determine the impact of helping high risk college students admitted to UW-Barron County during the Fall 2004 identify their strengths using the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) and applying these strengths to their general academic life and study techniques.

Research Objectives

The research objectives for this study include:

1. Identify high risk college students' areas of motivation in academics, coping, and receptivity of support services that need improvement through the administration of the College Student Inventory (CSI) (Retention Management System, 2001).

2. Identify high risk college students' strengths through the administration of the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment.
3. Identify the most common strengths among high risk college students.
4. Determine the impacts of a program identifying and applying strengths to academic performance of high risk college students.
5. Identify gender differences between high risk college students who were administered the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment and those who were not.
6. Identify differences in the amount of hours worked per week between high risk college students who were administered the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment and those who were not.

Significance of the Study

This study will contribute to the existing literature regarding high risk college students in the following ways.

1. Provide a method to apply the high risk students' strengths to their areas that need improvement to increase academic success (i.e., obtain a GPA of at least 2.0 on a 4.0 scale)

High risk college students begin their first semester of college with several academic challenges brought to their attention. They are in the lower quartile of their high school graduating class, score low on the ACT, and may score low on their English and math placement tests for the UW system. Due to these academic deficits, they are required to take remedial courses, limited to the number of credits they can take, and based on their placement test results, could be limited to specific courses they can take. By developing a method to apply their identified strengths to their academics, high risk students are shown that they have some control

over their learning experience. This results in the students' beliefs of increased personal control in the learning situation and increases their motivation for learning (Hootstein, 1996).

2. Provide support for changing the way high risk college students are advised during their first semester of college.

Currently, high risk college students admitted to UW-Barron County are required to sign a contract as part of the academic success program stating that they agree to the conditions set by the Assistant Campus Dean for Student Services. These conditions may include, but are not limited to, meeting with the Academic Assistance Advisor to ensure they sign up for the appropriate level courses, limiting enrollment in 12 credits, and enrolling in a learning skills course and/or the first year seminar course. The current contract and admission process does not help students identify any of their strengths that could assist them in overcoming challenges they may face as first semester college students.

3. Findings from this study may be used at the other UW College campuses.

One of the goals of the UW Colleges is to serve the special needs of minority, disadvantaged, disabled, and returning adult students (UW Colleges, 2003). As a result, the findings of this study can be shared to improve the advising and support provided to other high risk students across the 13 UW College campuses.

Assumptions and Limitations of the Study

The following limitations need to be considered.

1. Sample size

During Fall semester, UW-Barron County admits approximately 20 students determined to be high risk. Students also may decide to drop out of school before they can be administered

the assessments and participate in the study. As a result, the ability to generalize the findings from this study will be difficult due to the limited sample size of the population.

2. Follow-up with students

UW-Barron County is a non-residential campus located in northwestern Wisconsin. Most of the students attending the university commute to the campus, work part-time, and may have family responsibilities that may prevent them from attending campus on a regular basis. This limits the access and ability to follow-up with the students to discuss and apply the results of the assessment to their academics and challenges they may encounter.

3. Administration of StrengthsFinder®

The assessment is administered via the web. This may pose a problem for students who do not have access to the Internet or may not be comfortable using computers. The assessment is also timed. Students have only 20 seconds to respond to each item before the assessment moves to the next question. Depending on the students' reading ability, they may also have difficulty interpreting and understanding the items. These limitations may have an effect on the students' results.

4. Strength identification

The StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) identifies 34 themes unique to the student. However, students may not agree with the findings or may believe they have other strengths that were not identified. This could limit the ability of the researcher to provide students with accurate application of their strengths to academic development.

5. Self-reporting error

The assessments used in this study are considered self-report in nature. This means that students are asked to respond to a set of items that ask the students to share information about

themselves that could be considered personal or embarrassing. As a result, the students may decide to answer the items with a socially desirable response that is not a true representation of how they would honestly respond to the items. Their socially desirable responses may limit the receipt of accurate results and impact the effectiveness of the application of their strengths to academic development.

6. Limited funding resources

The cost of the assessment is $28 per student. Due to budget cuts, the researcher's budget for his position was drastically cut for the 2003-2004 academic year. The budget will not be increasing for the 2004-2005 academic year. The researcher will need to find sources of funding to cover the cost of the assessments used for the current study to prevent limits to the sample size.

7. Group characteristics

The researcher is assuming that the characteristics of the experimental group (Fall 2004 high risk students) and the control group (Fall 2003 high risk students) are similar. The admission criteria of high risk students remain constant. These students are lower quartile students. However, the socio-economic status, psychological development, placement test scores, and sources of motivation for academic achievement may vary.

Definition of Terms

For clarity, the following terms need to be defined.

Academic success – a semester and cumulative grade point average of 2.0 or better (UW Colleges, 2003).

High risk students – students with a "high school class rank in the lowest quartile; GED or GED certificate; high school academic course deficiencies; or transfer student entering on (academic) probation" (UW Colleges, 2003, p. 13).

Motivation – student's willingness to make sacrifices for academic success, show an interest in the learning process, feels capable of doing well in courses that require verbal and math/science confidence, values and desires a college education, and reflects a positive attitude toward educators (Retention Management System, 2001).

Strengths – the ability to provide consistent, near-perfect performance in a given activity (Clifton & Anderson, 2002).

Talent – a naturally occurring pattern of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be productively applied (Clifton & Anderson, 2002).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This chapter will provide an empirical review of literature regarding the characteristics of high risk college students, motivation theory, strategies that positively impact their academic success, and a discussion of three instruments that will be used to provide further evidence that there are other methods to determine a high risk students' potential beyond their high school academic performance or scores on standardized achievement tests.

High Risk Students

Students who do not meet the initial admission standards (e.g., high school rank, ACT score, placement test scores) to a university are required to enroll in remedial courses. Specifically, of all new freshmen entering their first semester of college, 28% need help in reading, 31 % need help with their writing, and 32% need help in math (Anderson, cited in Dunn, 1995). These students are classified as high risk due to their poor academic preparation and performance. However, there are a variety of characteristics to describe these students.

Beyond their past academic performance, these students can be described by non-academic characteristics. High risk students tend to exhibit low confidence or self-esteem and insecurities about their capability as a student (Bembenutty, 2003; Hootstein, 1996; Larose & Roy, 1991; Mealey, 1990), preoccupation with personal or family issues (Anderson & Cole, 1988; Francis & Kelly, 1990; Hootstein, 1996; Menec et al., 1994), work more than 20 hours per week (Anderson & Cole, 1988), and are first-generation students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Landward & Hepworth, 1984; Larose & Roy, 1991; Pizzolato, 2003). These students begin their college career with the odds stacked against them. They are more likely to experience academic failure or withdrawal from school as a result of these characteristics (Choy;

Yeh; cited in Pizzolato, 2003). Administrators are making admissions decisions based on the students' past academic performance from high school prior to their entry into college, focusing on the students' potential drop out rate, rather than achievement rates (Francis & Kelly, 1990). These academic variables and traditional measures have been found to be less valid in predicting students' success or failure and ignore the skills and strategies needed to adapt to the surrounding environment (Francis & Kelly, 1990; Menec et al., 1994). As a result, high risk students find themselves gaining admission, performing poorly, and consequently withdrawing or being academically dismissed (Landward & Hepworth, 1984). In order to prevent withdrawal and dismissal from occurring, universities need to understand where students find their source for motivation to continue or withdraw from college.

Motivation

There are a variety of theories that can be used to explain motivation in education. The following theories are examples currently being used to explain student motivation.

Self-Efficacy Theory

The self-efficacy theory refers to a student's judgment regarding his/her capability to perform a specific task at a particular level of performance (Seifert, 2004). Specifically, students who perceive themselves as capable are more likely to be self-regulating than those who do not see themselves at capable students.

Attribution Theory

Attribution theory explains students' motivation based on what the student perceives to be the cause of an outcome. According to Dembo and Seli (2004, p. 4), "attribution researchers believe that how students perceive the causes of their prior success and failures is the most important factor determining how they will approach a particular task and how long they will

persist at it." For example, Seifert (2004, p. 140) stated that "students who contribute success and failure to internal, controllable causes are more likely to feel pride, satisfaction, confidence, and have a higher sense of self-esteem." As a result, these students are more likely to put in the effort needed to study for exams and produce higher better quality work. In contrast, "students who attribute failure to internal, uncontrollable stable factors, or inability, are more likely to feel shame and humiliation and will show little effort" (Seifert, 2004, p. 140).

Self-Worth Theory

A student's motivation can be explained as attempts to maintain or increase self-worth (Covington, 1984 as cited in Seifert, 2004). Specifically, when a student succeeds due to their high ability, they will possess a feeling of pride and self-esteem. Consequently, if their effort results in failure, this implies low ability and leads to feelings of shame and humiliation (Seifert, 2004). As a result, students may exhibit failure avoiding strategies such as procrastination, maintaining disorganization, or cheating, to protect ability perceptions in the event of failure (Seifert, 2004).

Intrinsic-Extrinsic Motivation

This theory of motivation is one of the most researched perspectives of motivation (Lowman, 1990). The basic premise of this theory is that students are motivated through internal, intangible personal satisfactions (e.g., feeling competent) or external, tangible sources (e.g., grades).

These are only a few theories to explain what motivates students to learn. The theories should not discount the effect of personality or behavior disorders that may also influence a student's motivation (Seifert, 2004). However, these theories can provide a framework for educators to follow in terms of providing students an environment that will foster autonomy and

self-direction in the classroom (Seifert, 2004). If students perceive educators as nurturing, supportive, and helpful the students are more likely to feel a sense of confidence and self-determination and reflect learning-oriented behaviors exhibited in intrinsically motivated students (Seifert & O'Keefe, 2001, as cited in Seifert, 2004). One way for colleges and universities to provide students this support is through academic support programming for high risk students.

Strategies for Academic Success

Panori et al. (1995) found that students with sufficient social support were less likely to withdraw or dropout of school. One form of social support is through the implementation of academic support programs. The support program needs to be clearly structured, at least eight weeks in duration, content oriented, contain facilitative conditions (e.g., warmth and genuineness), and be seen as immediate and relevant to the student (Landward & Hepworth, 1984). By providing academic support programs that assist high risk students in transition to college, universities are recognizing the skills that the students possess upon entry and help students incorporate these skills into new learning environments and build upon what the students already know (Pizzolato, 2003). High risk students who participate in academic enrichment programs that resolve individual learning needs, utilize small groups, and role-play with mentors on implementation of successful study skills increase their grade point averages (Landward & Hepworth, 1984; Meyer, Cliff, & Dunn, 1994; Pagan & Edwards-Wilson, 2002). Another example of an academic support system is academic advising.

Academic advising is essential for student success. The Retention Management System (2001, p.1) describes advising as "a process involving much more than scheduling and signatures. At its heart, advising is an ongoing relationship. Advisement should provide

students with a person to whom they can turn with confidence when they need help." This is true for high risk students as well as for students who are performing at or above average. The role of the academic advisor is to be a resource for the student regarding university and specific academic program policies and procedures.

There are several styles used for academic advising. These styles may include solution-focused, developmental, or prescriptive. Another style that has proven to be effective is intrusive advising. In contrast to other advising methods where the students see their advisor on an as needed basis, the intrusive advising method is seen as more time-consuming, labor-intensive, and costly to implement (Ableman & Molina, 2002). Intrusive advising includes an initial letter to students with notification of a mandatory meeting with the advisor, a follow-up phone call before the meeting, development of an academic success plan with contingencies that the advisor and students establish, and follow-up depending upon the contingencies set. During the initial meeting, students are asked to identify their successes and challenges that could effect their academic performance. According to Larose and Roy (1991), motivation results from students' beliefs in the causes of their successes and failures. Through this process of self-examination, students will be able to attribute academic performance to their effort rather than ability. The benefit of this style of advising is reflected in the students' increased GPAs and positive impact on their overall academic performance and retention on campus (Ableman & Molina, 2002). Through the intrusive advising model, the students are more likely to become engaged in their own learning and take responsibility for their education. By taking responsibility for their own education and academic performance, high risk students will expend more effort and attribute success to their own effort, rather than an external source (Hootstein, 1996; Mealey, 1990;

Menec et al., 1994). One way to increase ownership and responsibility for their learning is through the application of study techniques and strategies that lead them to academic success.

One reason that high risk students may have academic difficulty during their first semester of college is due to the lack of college preparation in high school. Some students are able to survive high school without effort. They do the minimal amount of work that teachers require and receive average to above average grades. When these students reach college, they are not prepared for the effort that is required to be successful. They may also be overwhelmed by the thought of college and realize they are not prepared. In addition, if they had negative learning experiences as a high school student, due to poor teachers or lack of curricular content, these students require more support as they begin to learn on their own (Larose & Roy, 1991). Students need to become aware of their negative attitudes toward learning and themselves as learners, as well as have realistic beliefs in how success is achieved before they can expect their academic performance to change in college. Students need to be aware of time management, effective study techniques, and know that they can meet the academic requirements that will result in their success (Elliot et al., 1990). One way to make students aware of their beliefs and how success can be achieved is through awareness of the competencies and strengths they possess. This can be achieved through the administration of assessments and inventories.

Assessments

One method to help students have a successful first year experience is through the administration of the College Student Inventory (CSI) (Retention Management System, 2001). This instrument is used to identify a student's academic motivation, general coping skills, and receptivity to support services. Francis and Kelly (1990) found that students who participated in campus activities and utilized academic support services were more stimulated and their own

abilities could be broadly expanded. They also found that students who were integrated into the campus life were more successful academically. As stated earlier, the success of high risk students goes beyond past academic performance. There are several nonacademic factors that can contribute to success or failure as first semester college students. It is essential to identify these factors so the students can see that they are more than just a reflection of their high school record. They are individuals with diverse backgrounds who can influence their academic performance.

Another instrument to help students become aware of their skill, will, and self-regulation components of learning is the Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI) (Weinstein & Palmer, 2002). This instrument provides students with diagnosis of their strengths and challenges compared to other college students and provides them feedback about areas where they may be weak and need to improve their knowledge, skills, attitudes, motivations, and beliefs (Weinstein & Palmer, 2002). Before educators and administrators can expect students to be successful academically, the students need to identify their strengths and challenges and make changes to studying based on these results. Students need to be given the opportunity to develop nonacademic skills (e.g., attitudes and motivations) so they can apply these skills to academics and become successful students (Larose & Roy, 1991).

Larose and Roy (1991) found that predictors of success among high risk students included the students' fear of failure and exam anxiety. Specifically, successful students were less likely to fear failure and suffered less from exam anxiety than other students. Educators and administrators should be providing high risk students with the skills to cope with unfamiliar or intimidating situations, such as failure or anxiety. In addition to the instruments listed, the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) provides students an opportunity to identify

strengths and apply them to these challenging areas that may have an impact on academic success. The StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) identifies the high risk student's top five strength themes. Once these themes have been identified, the students can use them to determine how they should more effectively study for tests, take notes in class, form relationships with peers and instructors, or get involved in extracurricular activities that could contribute to their success and help them overcome other challenges that they may encounter in college.

Conclusion

As the literature reflects, there is more to predicting the academic performance of high risk students than their high school academic record. These students need to be seen as whole individuals beginning their first semester of college with more than a high school rank or GPA. They have skills, experiences, and motivations that can lead to academic success. Through the use of a variety of assessments to identify these variables, high risk students can be provided with the awareness and knowledge of their strengths. By developing and applying these strengths, high risk students will have the opportunity to exhibit the qualities of a successful student that Nelson (1998) listed as class attendance, preparation for class, perception of instructors as experts, development of an organized study routine, a repertoire of effective study skills, and taking responsibility for their own learning.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter will include information about the research design, selection of subjects, assessment instruments used, and method of collecting and analyzing the data. The chapter will conclude with the limitations of the study.

Research Design

The design of this project is a control-experimental group design. Since the goal of this study was to determine if the application of the strength themes identified in the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment can increase academic success, there were three groups. One group (control) was the high risk students admitted in Fall 2003. They were not administered the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) or LASSI (Weinstein & Palmer, 2002) assessments. The second control group was formed with high risk students from Fall 2004 who did not take the assessments due to lack of response to the researcher's request to participate in the study. The third group (experimental) was the high risk students admitted for Fall 2004 who were administered the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) and LASSI (Weinstein & Palmer, 2002) assessments and participated in advising to apply their strengths to academics based of the results of the assessments.

Selection of Subjects

UW-Barron County admits approximately twenty high risk students during the Fall semester. UW-Barron County defines high risk students as students who scored in the lower quartile of their high school graduating class. This definition was used to identify the students for inclusion in this study. The seventeen high risk students (4 females, 13 males) admitted and

enrolled at UW-Barron County during Fall 2004 were contacted and provided with a letter of the intent of the study and requested to participate (See Appendix A). These students were used as the experimental group in this study. The nineteen high risk students (7 females, 12 males) admitted and enrolled at UW-Barron County in the Fall 2003 were included in the control group.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

There were four instruments used to gather data on the subjects in this study. Each of the instruments and the mode of data collection for each are described below.

College Student Inventory (CSI)

The CSI is a 100-item questionnaire contained in 17 different scales and organized into three sections including academic motivation, general coping skills, and receptivity to support services (Retention Management System, 2001). The CSI also contains items reporting background characteristics such as hours worked, high school grades, and family background.

The questionnaire was administered to all new students during the Fall orientation program. The results of the inventory were delivered to the student's academic advisor. Since the high risk students are assigned to the Academic Assistance Advisor (the researcher) as their advisor, all of their results were sent to him. In order for the students to receive the results, they needed to meet with their advisor. At this meeting, the results were reviewed with the student and goals were set based on these results. The results of the Fall 2003 high risk students were accessible through the Assistant Dean of Student Services.

Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI)

The LASSI is a 10-scale, 80-item assessment of students' awareness and use of learning and study strategies. The focus of the assessment is on the thoughts, behaviors, attitudes,

motivations, and beliefs that relate to successful learning in higher education (Weinstein & Palmer, 2002).

The LASSI was administered to all students enrolled in the Learning Skills (LEA 102) course offered during the Fall 2004 semester. All high risk students are required to take this course. However, the students who are unable to take the course due to scheduling conflicts or other reasons were asked to meet individually with the Academic Assistance Advisor to complete the assessment.

The assessment is a self-scoring assessment where the students compute their own scores. The results were discussed during an individual appointment set with the Academic Assistance Advisor and goals were set based on these results. The high risk students from Fall 2003 were not required to complete this assessment.

StrengthsFinder®

StrengthsFinder® measures 34 talent themes that are recurring patterns of thought, feeling, or behavior that can be applied to a student's academic life (Clifton & Anderson, 2002). This instrument provides individualized learning about the student's strengths and provides the advisor opportunities to connect with students about their strengths. Specifically, the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) helps students discover a sense of identity and purpose through the identification and application of strengths to increase academic achievement, class selection, major selection, and career planning.

This is a web-based assessment that students completed on the computer. StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) presents 180 items to the student. Each item consists of a pair of self-descriptors, such as "I read instructions carefully" versus "I like to jump right into things." The descriptors are placed as polar ends of a continuum. The students are

asked to choose from a pair of statements that best describes them, and also to what extent that chosen option is descriptive of their behavior. The students are given 20 seconds to respond to a given pair of descriptors before the program moves to the next pair. After taking the forty minute assessment, the students were immediately able to find out the results of the assessment and see their top five signature themes (Gallup Organization, 2004). At the initial individual meeting that students had with the Academic Assistance Advisor, the students were given the access information to complete the assessment on-line. After the students completed the assessment, they were asked to share their top five themes with the advisor. The high risk students from Fall 2003 were not required to complete this assessment.

Once all of the students identified their five strengths, the Academic Assistance Advisor scheduled individual appointments with each student. During these individual appointments the advisor used a standard questionnaire with each student to record a variety of demographic information and the results from the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment to maintain consistency across all of the students. The questionnaire was developed based on questions obtained from the Gallup Organization (2004). See Appendix B for a copy of the questionnaire.

UW Placement Test

All new freshmen are required to take the English and math placement test to determine the appropriate level English and math courses to take during their first semester of college. They generally take this test in the spring of their senior year of high school at a regional placement test site or they take it during the summer at new student registration on campus.

Most high risk students place into Basic Composition (ENG 098) and Basic Mathematics (MAT 090) or Elementary Algebra (MAT 091). These are considered non-degree, remedial

courses and are not counted toward the completion of the Associate of Arts and Science degree or calculated into the student's GPA. Students who place into ENG 098 are also required to enroll in Learning Skills (LEA 102), another non-degree course. The Academic Assistance Advisor has access to the results of the placement tests. The results for the high risk students from Fall 2003 were available in their permanent student record.

Other

In addition to the scores and results of the assessments listed above, the final Fall semester GPAs for the Fall 2003 and Fall 2004 were obtained. In addition, the standard questionnaire was used to record the results of the respective assessments and semester GPAs for all subjects.

Data Analysis

The primary purpose of this study was to determine if the use of the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) had an impact on the academic performance (i.e., achieving a semester GPA of 2.0 or greater) of first semester, high risk college students. In order to determine an effect, the GPAs of the Fall 2003 semester students (control group) were compared with the Fall 2004 semester students (experimental group) for a significant difference through the use of a correlation statistical analysis to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the two groups of high risk students. The GPAs (dependent variable) of the two groups were compared to determine if the use of the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) (independent variables) had an effect on the GPAs of the high risk college students. In addition, student records were used to gather descriptive statistics of the sample.

Limitations

The following limitations may impact the results of the study.

1. Advisor as principle investigator

The advisor of the high risk students was the principle investigator for this study. Given the other responsibilities in the advisor's position, the ability to follow-up with each subject and time spent administering assessments and advising each subject was limited.

2. Sample size

Since UW-Barron County only admits approximately 20 high risk students the sample size is limited. In addition, students may decide to drop out of school during the semester before they can be administered the assessments and participate in the study. As a result, the ability to generalize the findings from this study to other campuses was limited or used with caution.

3. Follow-up with students

UW-Barron County is a non-residential campus located in northwestern Wisconsin. Most of the students attending the university commute to campus, work part-time, and may have family responsibilities that prevent them from attending campus on a regular basis. This limited the access and ability to follow-up with the students regarding the results of the assessment and application of their results to the challenges they may encounter.

4. Administration of the CSI, StrengthsFinder®, and LASSI

Similar to follow-up with students, complete participation and administration of assessments was difficult. In addition, given the characteristics of high risk college students, there may be undiagnosed learning disabilities and issues surrounding reading levels and comprehension that could impact the result of the assessment and the study.

Another issue may be the technological literacy of students. The StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) is a web-based assessment. This may have posed a problem for students who do not have access to the Internet or may not be comfortable using computers. The

assessment is also timed. Students had only 20 seconds to respond to each item before the assessment moves the student to the next question. Depending on the students' reading ability, they may have had difficulty interpreting and understanding the items in the allotted time. These limitations may have an effect on the students' results.

5. Self-reporting error

The assessments used in this study are considered self-report in nature. This means that students are asked to respond to a set of items that ask them to share information about themselves that could be considered personal or embarrassing. As a result, the students may have answered the item with a socially desirable response that was not a true representation of how they would honestly respond to the items.

Summary

Based on the results obtained from this study, the advising program for high risk students was evaluated and changes were discussed and recommended to provide the supportive environment these students need to achieve academic success during their first, and future, semesters of college.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the impact of helping high risk college students admitted to UW-Barron County during the Fall 2004 identify and apply their strengths using the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) to their general academic life and study techniques to improve their academic performance. This chapter will report the findings related to the purpose and objectives of the study.

Objective 1: Identify high risk college students' areas of motivation in academics, coping, and receptivity of support services that need improvement through the administration of the College Student Inventory (CSI).

The College Student Inventory (CSI) was administered to all students who attended the new student orientation in Fall 2003 and Fall 2004. The CSI identifies students' areas of motivation in academics, coping, and receptivity of support services that need improvement. The data for each scale are reported as percentiles based on a national norm percentile of 50 percent. Specifically, this study looked at the scales for students' inclination to drop out of school before completing a degree (dropout proneness), likelihood to have low grades in college (predicted academic difficulty), and desire to receive individual help with study habits, reading skills, test-taking skills, writing skills, or math skills (receptivity to academic assistance). The greater their score or percentile rating on these scales, the more likely students will dropout, experience academic difficulty, and be receptive to receiving academic assistance, respectively. The vendor for the CSI supplied summary reports including a statistical summary for all of the

students who completed the assessment at new student orientation in Fall 2003 and Fall 2004. The mean percentile scores for these students are listed in Table 1.

Table 1

College Student Inventory Results for All New Students

Scale	Fall 2003 n	Fall 2003 M	Fall 2003 SD	Fall 2004 n	Fall 2004 M	Fall 2004 SD
Dropout Proneness	156	75.70	n/a	178	71.50	n/a
Predicted Academic Difficulty	156	56.10	n/a	178	60.70	n/a
Receptivity to Academic Assistance	156	46.40	n/a	178	53.30	n/a

The summary reports also included a series of lists of students having special needs. Several of the students in the control and experimental groups of this study were included on these lists. The mean percentile scores for the dropout proneness, predicted academic difficulty, and receptivity to academic assistance scales for Fall 2003 and Fall 2004 control groups are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

College Student Inventory Results for Control Groups

Scale	Fall 2003 n	Fall 2003 M	Fall 2003 SD	Fall 2004 n	Fall 2004 M	Fall 2004 SD
Dropout Proneness	12	89.67	10.82	6	88.67	7.50
Predicted Academic Difficulty	14	85.57	11.14	6	90.83	9.47
Receptivity to Academic Assistance	14	53.07	24.77	6	65.17	30.09

The mean percentile scores for the Fall 2004 experimental group who were administered the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) are listed in Table 3.

Table 3

College Student Inventory Results for Experimental Group

Scale	n	Fall 2004 M	SD
Dropout Proneness	7	89.14	11.52
Predicted Academic Difficulty	8	90.25	7.65
Receptivity to Academic Assistance	8	56.25	19.14

The percentile scores for the high risk students in Fall 2003 and Fall 2004 are noticeably higher than the average for all students who completed the assessment. However, while the high risk students' scores from Fall 2003 and Fall 2004 on the dropout proneness and predicted academic difficulty scales were noticeably higher than all new students who completed the assessment in Fall 2004, their scores on the receptivity to academic assistance scale were similar. This may reflect that all students are reluctant to seek academic help. However, for high risk students who may experience more challenges relating to academic preparation and motivation, the lack of receptivity to academic assistance could have a more detrimental impact on their academic performance than the performance of the other students. The experimental group did not reflect significantly different scores on the three scales compared to the two control groups in this study. However, the high risk students' scores are slightly greater than all students on the dropout proneness and receptivity to academic assistance scales. The specific number of high risk students who dropped out in Fall 2003 included five formal withdraws, which includes the

completion of the official withdraw paperwork. There were also two high risk students who stopped attending classes but did not formally withdraw, resulting in a semester GPA of 0.00. During Fall 2004, there were only two high risk students who stopped attending classes without formally completing the withdraw paperwork. However, the greatest difference in scores between all students and the high risk students is reflected in the scale predicting academic difficulty.

There is approximately a 30 percentile increase in predicted academic difficulty for the high risk students compared with the averages for all of the students who completed the assessment. Specifically, the high risk students were predicted to experience greater academic difficulty than students who are in the upper 75th percentile of their high school class.

Objective 2: Identify high risk college students' strengths through the administration of the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment.

Of the seventeen students admitted as high risk students in Fall 2004 and contacted to participate in this study, the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) was administered to 2 females and 7 males who met with the researcher to discuss and apply the results of the assessment. After completing the assessment, the students' top five strengths were identified. Table 4 shows all of the strengths that were identified and their respective rankings (1 = first strength and 5 = fifth strength). The assessment instrument and strength definitions, copyrighted by the Gallup Organization, are not included with respect to copyright infringement.

Table 4

StrengthsFinder® Results

	Ranking					
Strength	1	2	3	4	5	Total

Includer		1	1	3	2	7
Communication	1	1	1	1	1	5
Adaptability	1	2	1			4
Positivity		1		1	2	4
Harmony	1			1	1	3
Woo	1		2			3
Competition	1	1				2
Consistency	1		1			2
Empathy	1		1			2
Focus		1	1			2
Achiever	1					1
Activator		1				1
Analytical			1			1
Command				1		1
Context	1					1
Deliberative				1		1
Futuristic					1	1
Ideation					1	1
Input					1	1
Significance				1		1

The ranking and frequency of the strengths that were identified can be used to accurately describe the academic behavior of the high risk students. The more frequent and highly ranked

strengths foster interaction (Includer and Communication) that could prevent students from attending class and completing assignments. In contrast, the less frequent and lower ranked strengths (Deliberative and Command) could provide students with the means to overcome obstacles and take control of their academic performance and success.

Objective 3: Identify the most common strengths among high risk college students.

The StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment was used to identify high risk college students' top five strengths out of a possible 34 strengths. The assessment was administered to 10 of the 17 high risk students admitted for Fall 2004. Only 9 of the 10 students who completed the assessment met with the researcher to discuss the results.

The most common strengths were Includer, which describes people who are accepting of others; Communication, which describes people who find it easy to put thoughts into words, Adaptability, which describes people who prefer to go with the flow; and Positivity, which describes people who have enthusiasm that is contagious (Clifton & Anderson, 2002). These are strengths that could result in increased social activity (Communication) and living in the moment (Adaptability) that may have a negative effect on the academic performance and success of high risk students. These students may be more concerned about meeting new people and making sure everyone is included (Woo and Includer) rather than focusing on the task at hand and paying attention to school work.

Objective 4: Determine the impacts of a program identifying and applying strengths to academic performance of high risk college students.

Table 5 shows the academic performance results for the high risk students in the control groups (C) for Fall 2003 and Fall 2004 and the experimental group (E) for Fall 2004.

Table 5

Academic Performance Results

Semester	Male	Female	Total	Mean First Semester GPA	SD	Mean HighSchool Rank	Mean ACT Score
Fall 2003 (C)	10	4	14	2.13	1.12	20	18
Fall 2004 (C)	6	2	8	1.36	.40	13	17
Fall 2004 (E)	7	2	9	1.67	1.22	16	17

An ANOVA was performed on the GPAs of the control and experimental groups. The results reflected no significant differences ($p = .232$) in the academic performance (i.e., GPA) between students who completed the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) and those who did not. Pearson and Spearman's correlation showed there were no significant differences in GPA between the control groups and the experimental group that was administered the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment. Table 6 shows the respective correlation between the two groups.

Table 6

GPA Correlations for Control and Experimental Groups

Pearson	1	2
1. GPA 2003 (C)	--	.181
2. GPA 2004 (E)		--

Spearman's	1	2

1. GPA 2003 (C)	--	.318
2. GPA 2004 (E)		--

Note: The values represent a sample size of n = 18.

It should be noted that five high risk students admitted in Fall 2003 formally withdrew from the semester and were not included in the GPA calculation. In addition, two of the 14 students included in the Fall 2003 control group stopped attending classes resulting in a semester GPA of 0.00. The experimental group included two students who also stopped attending classes without formally withdrawing from the semester, resulting in a semester GPA of 0.00. Students in each group completed a mix of degree and non-degree courses. Table 7 provides a summary of the type of credits the control and experimental students completed during their first semester of college.

Table 7

Credits Completed for the Control and Experimental Groups

Group	n	Average Degree Credits	Average Non-Degree Credits	Average Total Credits	Total Number of Drops/Withdraws
Fall 2003 (C)	15	9	3	12	8
Fall 2004 (C)	8	9	3	13	0
Fall 2004 (E)	9	8	4	12	3

Since there were no significant differences between the GPAs, the results of the program that identified and applied the strengths of high risk students appear to have a minimal impact on academic performance.

Objective 5: Identify gender differences between high risk college students who were administered the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment and those who were not.

As previously mentioned, only 4 of the 17 subjects in the experimental group were female and 7 of the 19 subjects in the control group were female. In the experimental group, only 2 of the females completed the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment and earned a GPA for the semester. In the control group, only 4 of the females and 10 of the males completed the semester and earned a GPA for the semester. There were no significant differences between the groups. The mean GPA for males (MGPA) and females (FGPA) are listed in Table 8.

Table 8

Mean GPA Based on Gender

Control Group	n	M	SD
MGPA 2003	10	1.72	1.07
FGPA 2003	4	3.14	.31
Experimental Group	**n**	**M**	**SD**
MGPA 2004	7	1.67	1.22
FGPA 2004	2	1.58	2.24

Objective 6: Identify differences in the amount of hours worked per week between high risk college students who were administered the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment and those who were not.

Several of the subjects who completed the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment reported working at least part-time while attending classes. Table 9 provides a summary of their work hours. Employment information for the control groups was not available.

Table 9

Work Hour Ranges for Experimental Group

Range	# of Subjects
0 – 5 hours	3
6 – 10 hours	1
11 – 15 hours	1
16 – 20 hours	1
21 – 25 hours	1
26 or more hours	2

CHAPTER V

SUMMARY, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

High risk college students begin college labeled high risk because of their unsatisfactory performance in high school. Their academic challenges are further identified by high school quartile rankings, ACT scores, college placement test scores, and results of self-assessments administered at orientation. The identification of their challenges results in the students' lowered self-esteem, insecurity about their abilities, and overall negative attitudes towards education (Hootstein, 1996).

In an attempt to shift the students' focus from their academic challenges, the purpose of this study was to determine the impact of helping high risk college students admitted to UW-Barron County during the Fall of 2004 identify their strengths using the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment and applying these strengths to their general academic life and study techniques to increase academic success.

Summary

The characteristics of the high risk students in this study are comparable to the characteristics found in the research discussed in Chapter 2. The students were admitted based only on high school rank and ACT scores resulting in their identification as high risk students. In addition, further challenges were identified based on the results of the CSI administered during new student orientation. Specifically, the high risk students in this study were predicted to experience academic difficulty and have a proneness to dropout out of college. Despite the administration of the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) as an attempt to identify and utilize their strengths, the high risk students who were admitted during the Fall 2004 completed

the semester with an average GPA of 1.54, showing no significant difference from the students in the control group from Fall 2003.

In addition to taking the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002), the high risk students were provided additional academic support through resources and programming as part of the academic success program. These resources included a learning skills course, study skills workshops, and mandatory advising provided by the researcher. Based on previous studies regarding academic support programs, students who received this support were reported to be less likely to withdraw or drop out of school (Landward & Hepworth, 1984; Panori et al, 1995; Pizzolato, 2003). The following section will discuss confounds and limitations that may have had an impact on the results obtained for each of the objectives in this study.

Limitations

First and foremost, the sample size was not large enough. According to Dr. Amy Gillett (personal communication, January 24, 2004), a professor who teaches a section of the Research Foundations course at UW-Stout, correlation studies should have at least 30 matched samples. Given that this study had 19 subjects in the control group and 9 subjects that took the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment in the experimental group, the results were not shown to be significant. The characteristics of the sample could also explain the lack of significant results.

Given that UW-Barron County is not a residential campus, all of the subjects were commuter students. As a result, the ability to contact and follow-up with each of the subjects was difficult. The researcher made initial contact with the subjects during the meetings when the CSI results were discussed. However, after this meeting students missed scheduled appointments to take and discuss the results of the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002)

assessment. The researcher worked to follow up with these students through phone calls and e-mails; however, the results of these efforts were not successful. Landward and Hepworth (1984) stated programs need to be structured, content driven, at least eight weeks in length, and immediate and relevant to the student. This study's lack of continuous contact with the subjects, immediacy, and relevancy to the student could have resulted in the lack of significant findings.

The students' level of motivation could also explain the lack of response to the researcher's attempts at contacting them. As the motivational literature suggests, there are a variety of theories to explain students' motivation in education. For example, students may believe they can't change; don't want to change; don't know how to change; or don't know what to change (Dembo & Seli, 2004). It is difficult to change a student's academic behavior without understanding each student's source of motivation. Dembo and Seli (2004) state if educators focus only on strategies regarding how to learn or only on the motivational processes that support learning, they will not be able to change a student's academic behavior.

Another characteristic that may have impacted the results is the socio-economic status and familial background of the subjects. Given that a majority of the students are first-generation students, they are the first members of their family to attend college. As a result, neither the students nor their parents know what the expectations are for a college student. Many of the students may view college as a continuation of high school. They may carry on study patterns and habits that allowed them to pass through high school, but are now ineffective and resulting in less than satisfactory academic progress in college. In addition, the students' parents may place unrealistic familial responsibilities on them and expect them to take care of household chores, work to support themselves and/or the family, and other tasks that may have interfered

with the students' new role as college students and resulted in lower grades and lack of commitment and importance placed on school work.

Lastly, there are psychological and emotional issues that may have had an impact on the academic success of the high risk students in this study. They may have undiagnosed learning disabilities (reading ability) or other disorders (depression or ADD) that prevented them from achieving academic success during their first semester of college. The first semester of college can be a difficult time for students. For some students, this is the first time they have been living on their own. While UW-Barron County is not a residential campus, many students have moved away from home and live locally in apartments or other housing options. These students have been removed from familiar surroundings and may struggle with adjustments to this new found autonomy. As a result, students may begin exhibiting the symptoms of depression and becoming withdrawn socially causing them to miss classes. In addition, as mentioned earlier, these students may be relying on their study habits from high school that allowed them to earn grades in high school. Given the different expectations from the faculty and staff in a higher education environment, these students may begin to realize they are struggling to understand the material caused by learning disabilities that had been undiagnosed in high school. These are just a few of the adjustments that high risk students, as well as other students, may encounter during their first semester of college.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and limitations stated in this study, the following recommendations can be made for future use of the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) and CSI assessments and the provision of academic success programming to high risk college students.

1. The academic performance of the high risk students needs to be followed beyond their first semester of college to determine the effectiveness of any intervention program. The first semester of college for any student is a time of transition. Students are learning the expectations of their instructors, adjusting to new peers, and figuring out who they are as students and individuals. Given that the UW Colleges are freshman-sophomore campuses of the UW System, the high risk students should be tracked during their whole stay at that campus to determine if the resources they were provided and the strategies they learned had an impact on their academic success for the first two years of college.
2. Provide a more structured and content-driven intervention program using the StrengthsFinder® (Clifton & Anderson, 2002) assessment. An education guide consisting of worksheets, activities, and other resources was provided with the assessment. The current study used an academic advising questionnaire (see Appendix B) to record subject information related to demographic, course, and advising information. However, the questionnaire was only used by the researcher. In order to provide the subjects an opportunity to implement and apply their strengths, more activities are needed. One forum that would allow this to occur would be through a first year seminar course. Students, who were admitted as high risk, would be required to take the course that would be structured around the activities and resources available in the educator's guide. This would provide students an opportunity to apply their strengths and receive feedback from the instructor. Dembo and Seli (2004) recommend a structure that involves self-observation and evaluation (weekly journals and self-assessment exercises), goal setting and strategic planning

(setting intermediate and long-term goals), strategy implementation and monitoring (are students reaching their goals), and strategic-outcome monitoring (review self-assessments and academic performance).

3. In addition to conducting the present study, the researcher was responsible for recruitment activities, tutoring, advising approximately 90 students, and other activities to support the recruitment and retention of returning adult students, high risk students, as well as the general student population on campus. By focusing the position to include only responsibilities related to the academic success of high risk and the general student population, more time would be available to meet the needs of these populations.
4. The UW Colleges system needs to adjust the definition of high risk students. The current definition includes students who are in the lower quartile of their high school graduating class, earned a GED or High School Equivalency Diploma (HSED), or transferred from another college on academic probation (UW Colleges, 2003). This definition of a high risk student may limit the scope of providing academic support services to only these students. The literature defines high risk students as having low confidence or insecurities about their capability as a student (Bembenutty, 2003; Hootstein, 1996; Larose & Roy, 1991; Mealey, 1990), preoccupation with personal or family issues (Anderson & Cole, 1988; Francis & Kelly, 1990; Hootstein, 1996; Menec et al., 1994), work more than 20 hours per week (Anderson & Cole, 1988), and are first-generation students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Landward & Hepworth, 1984; Larose & Roy, 1991; Pizzolato, 2003). These are the characteristics of the students that the UW College serves. By limiting the definition to students'

high school rank or academic standing from another institution, the UW Colleges is excluding other students who may struggle academically during their first semester of college. These students should also be provided the same services that are given to the currently defined high risk students.

5. The College Student Inventory (CSI) results should be used to identify other students who may experience academic difficulty. The summary reports used to report the data on the control and experimental groups in this study identified several other students who had dropout proneness, predicted academic difficulty, and receptivity to academic assistance, but were not classified as high risk students. These students should be provided access to structured, content-driven programming so they have the opportunity to achieve academic success.
6. The researcher (academic advisor) needs to be aware of the students' source of academic motivation. Once the researcher can identify what motivates the students, programming can be developed that complements the students' motivational behavior and helps students change their academic behavior.

Conclusion

Due to limitations in sample size and other characteristics of the sample, there was not a significant difference in high risk students' academic performance after identifying and applying their strengths. However, this study helped to better define the characteristics of high risk students beyond their high school quartile ranking. Their strengths were used to describe variables that may have hindered academic performance. For example, the high risk students exhibited social themes or strengths that may have interfered in their ability to focus on academics and led them to participate in extracurricular activities that prevented them from

achieving academic success. The CSI helped to identify characteristics specific to the high risk student population in terms of their dropout proneness, predicted academic difficulty, and receptivity to academic assistance.

As a result of the assessments used in this study, college admissions offices need to reconsider and potentially broaden the scope and characteristics they use to define a high risk student. Admissions offices may need to develop and promote programs that will help all students identify their academic goals, motivation, and strategies to overcome personal and academic obstacles that may prevent them from achieving their goals and academic success.

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Appendix A: Letter of Intent

Date

First Name,

You have been invited to participate in a study I am conducting as part of my Education Specialist degree at UW-Stout. The study will look at how your areas of motivation in academics, coping, receptivity of support services, and the identification and application of your strengths can impact your academic performance. As part of the study you will be asked to take the College Student Inventory (CSI), Learning and Study Strategies Inventory (LASSI), and StrengthsFinder® assessments. By taking these assessments and participating in the study you will have an opportunity to discover your strengths and develop strategies to apply them to your academics resulting in an effort to increase your academic performance through academic advising appointments with me.

The study will take place during the fall 2004 semester. You will be advised exclusively by myself, the primary researcher for the study. As a result, I will be the only person who will know your identity and participation in the study ensuring your confidentiality. Only group responses will be reported. This informed consent will not be kept with any of the other documents completed with this project.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You may choose not to participate without any adverse consequences to you. Should you choose to participate and later wish to withdraw from the study, you may discontinue your participation at that time without incurring adverse consequences. Before signing this form, please ask questions concerning any aspects of this study that are unclear to you.

This study has been reviewed and approved by the University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and the University of Wisconsin Colleges (UWC) Senate Research Review Committee. Both campuses have determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the UW-Stout IRB Administrator or the chairperson of the UWC Senate Research Review Committee.

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Sincerely,

Travis Ramage

By signing this consent form you agree to participate in the project entitled, *Identifying and Applying Strengths to Improve Academic Performance of First-Semester, High-Risk College Students Attending UW-Barron County Using the StrengthsFinder® Assessment Instrument.*

_____

Signature Date

Appendix B: Academic Advising Questionnaire

Academic Advising Questionnaire

Demographic Information

Name: _____ Test Results: English _____
Math _____
ACT _____
HS Rank _____

Address: _____
_____ E-mail: _____

Phone #: (home) _____ Employer: _____
(cell) _____ Hours/week: _____

Course Information

Major: _____ Transfer Institution/Semester of Transfer: _____

Semester: Fall Spring Summer Year: _____

Course/Number	Time	Cr.	Goal Grade	Final Grade
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
_____	_____	_____	_____	_____

Advising Questions

1. Do you see potential problem areas in any of your courses? _____ Yes _____ No

   If yes, please list the courses and describe your concern.

   a. _____ _____
   b. _____ _____
   c. _____ _____
   d. _____ _____

2. Of all my classes, I am worried most about... _____.
   I am worried least about... _____.

3. What are your academic goals?

   a. _____
   b. _____

c. _____
d. _____

4. What did you learn with the greatest ease in high school?

5. In what areas do you feel you have the greatest academic skills?

6. What are your five signature themes? _____
_____
_____
_____
_____

7. Which of your strengths do you feel are most characteristic of you?
_____
_____
_____

8. How have your strengths helped you succeed in the past?

9. In the past, which of your strengths did you rely on to get you through difficult times?

10. Which of your strengths do you think can help you most at this time?

11. Which of your strengths do want to develop while you are college?

12. What college experiences and/or classes could you use to develop your strengths?

13. In what areas do you want to achieve in college?

14. Which of the strengths do you think might help you achieve in those areas?

15. How could you apply your strengths to help you succeed in those areas where you most want to achieve?

Notes: