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## Defining Levels of Learning for Strengths Development Programs in Pharmacy

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**Key Words:** strengths, education, professional development, career development

**Abstract:** *The Clifton StrengthsFinder® is an online measure of personal talent that identifies where an individual's greatest potential for building strengths exists. This paper describes a framework for strengths education in pharmacy which includes introductory, intermediate and advanced levels of learning. The use of the StrengthsFinder® assessment and supporting workshops aids student pharmacists, pharmacy residents and practitioners in identifying and refining their talents and connecting talents to roles in the profession. Additional learning strategies support a learner's progression to intermediate and advanced levels of learning, which focus on the application of strengths in teams, leadership, and organizational development. By articulating and recognizing levels of learning around strengths-related content and skills, strong instructional design is fostered. Optimal design includes development of a sequence of learning opportunities delivered over time, a roll-out plan and consideration of the instructional resources required.*

### Introduction

To address the calls for Medication Therapy Management and improved medication use safety, it is imperative that pharmacists are giving the best of their abilities to the profession. The old adage "everyone is good at something" is true. The challenge for the profession is to identify and productively engage the talents of each pharmacist, in order to advance the profession and address the medication-related needs of society. In addition to meeting the profession's needs, identifying and applying one's personal talents is relevant for leadership development, as well as working within teams or participating in career renewal.<sup>1-7</sup>

The genesis of strengths work at the University of Minnesota College of Pharmacy was based on a 2002 conversation with faculty from the James MacGregor Burns Academy of Leadership at the University of Maryland, responding to the question, "What one resource would you recommend for developing young leaders?" The confident and immediate recommendation was the book *Now, Discover Your Strengths* and the use of the Clifton StrengthsFinder®. As a result, the use of this content was integrated into an elective leadership development seminar for third year professional students in 2002. The value of strengths, the "strengths philosophy" and an educational process for strengths for the profession has been articulated previously.<sup>8</sup> Since 2002, experience with

strengths-related education has been gained for various pharmacy audiences, including student pharmacists, pharmacy practice residents and pharmacists mid-career. This experience has allowed the articulation of three levels of learning. In this paper, these progressive levels of instruction will be described, including core learning objectives for strengths development programs aimed at introductory, intermediate and advanced learners.

### Strengths and the Clifton StrengthsFinder®

The Clifton StrengthsFinder® is an online assessment that identifies areas where an individual's greatest potential for building strengths exists. Areas of talent are categorized into 34 Signature Themes, defined as naturally recurring patterns of thought, feeling or behavior that can be productively applied.<sup>9</sup> The assessment is comprised of 177-item pairs based on 30 years of research, and has been subjected to psychometric examination.<sup>10</sup> At the conclusion of the assessment, individuals receive their top five Signature Themes of Talent. The use of this categorization system for talents allows individuals to concisely articulate their talents and use a common language to describe talents when working with others. Once talents are identified and the activities where these talents can be effectively utilized are discovered, the development of complementary knowledge and skills can be pursued to achieve excellent performance. Strengths are exhibited through specific activities where talents, knowledge and skills are utilized and where performance is energizing, engaging and excellent.

Refining and honing one's strengths is the work of a lifetime,<sup>9</sup> but, that work can be supported by targeted educational

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opportunities over the course of time. The use of the StrengthsFinder® assessment and a supporting workshop aids individuals in identifying and articulating their talents. However, Hodge and Harter describe a strengths building process that necessitates moving beyond a single educational event and includes: recognizing one's talents and taking ownership for them, recognizing the value from performing activities congruent with one's talents, making a conscious effort to seek out opportunities to exercise those talents and share information about them with others and adding relevant knowledge and skills to those talents to build strengths.<sup>11</sup>

Lopez and Louis acknowledge that a common first step is administration of the Clifton StrengthsFinder®. However, these authors also specify that strengths based education should involve not only strengths assessment, but also individualized advising/teaching, networking with supporters of strengths development, deliberate application of strengths within and outside the classroom and intentional development of strengths through active seeking of novel experiences.<sup>12</sup>

Bowers and Lopez have specifically examined the variables that lead students to "go from the identification of personal strengths to proceed with interest and utilize these strengths in daily life." This movement from the identification stage to enthusiastic application of strengths was referred to as capitalizing. They found that three constructs were important in capitalizing on strengths, namely social support, experiences of success and reinforcement of strengths.<sup>13</sup>

### Overview of Instructional Experience

Levels of learning emerged over time by assessing patterns in learner response and performance. From 2002-2010, educational initiatives designed and delivered by the authors have engaged over 700 student pharmacists and pharmacists. Figure 1 describes the various pharmacy audiences and illustrates the unique purpose of strengths instruction for each group. Figure 2 outlines the time period over which these educational initiatives have been developed.

Strengths related education was delivered through the professional curriculum, residency training and continuing pharmacy education. The courses and educational initiatives used to deliver this content include:

- a career development seminar series for all student pharmacists entering Advanced Pharmacy Practice Experiences (APPEs)
- an *Introductory Pharmacy Practice Experience (IPPE) Foundations* course for all student pharmacists

- a *Leading Change in Pharmacy* elective course for student pharmacists
- leadership APPEs for student pharmacists enrolled in a curricular Leadership Emphasis Area
- workshops for student organization leaders
- resident learning experiences and a strengths-based focus for pharmacy practice resident evaluations
- a live "Conversations on Pharmacy Leadership" continuing education series for practicing pharmacists
- an online continuing education course titled "Leadership Best Sellers" for practicing pharmacists

Each of these educational initiatives has been customized for its audience. Most have employed live workshop style learning to encourage conversation and engagement with both instructors and peers. Online modules were developed for asynchronous learning and employed streaming presentations, reflection activities and graded assignments to support understanding and application. In all but one program (*Conversations on Pharmacy Leadership*), participants completed the StrengthsFinder® assessment prior to participating in learning activities facilitated by instructors. Evaluation of these educational initiatives is reported elsewhere.<sup>14</sup>

### Defined Levels of Learning

Eight years of experience developing instructional strategies for strengths has ultimately allowed us to identify and define three distinct levels of learning. These levels ensure movement beyond Signature Theme identification. Competency was desired in the development of personal strengths. To that end, objectives were designed to encourage in-depth exploration of the Signature Themes and strengths of individual participants. These objectives were to be achieved through a succession of intentional development activities occurring over time and utilizing social support and networking. However, competencies related to strengths in others are also important. Therefore, in addition to creating depth in personal strengths related abilities, the levels were designed to also challenge intermediate and advanced learners to begin developing skills in facilitating strengths conversations and in methods for educating others within teams and organizations.

Recognition of these levels can assist instructors in defining learning objectives, audiences and teaching strategies as they incorporate strengths instruction into student development, career development or leadership development activities. Table 1 outlines the learning objectives and learning activities at each level.

All participants begin at an introductory level, which is focused on developing knowledge of one's talents and the methods by which each talent can be utilized in pharmacy. Select groups progress on to Intermediate and Advanced Levels. To date, the target audiences for Intermediate Levels have been students choosing to participate in an elective leadership course (*Leading Change in Pharmacy*), pharmacists participating in a shared mentoring program as part of this elective (Leadership Networking Partners Program), and pharmacy practice residents. Target audiences for advanced level strengths development have included students enrolled in the College's Leadership Emphasis Area and pharmacy practice residents completing the Pharmaceutical Care Leadership Residency program.

#### *Introductory Level*

All participants (i.e. student pharmacists, residents, pharmacists) begin by mastering the learning objectives at the introductory level (Table 1). This level of instruction is recommended for everyone in the profession.

In preparing to teach at this level, it was helpful to have studied several popular resources discussing the Clifton StrengthsFinder® and the value of strengths in personal development (Table 2). Some instructors may find it helpful to attend live or participate in online programming offered by the Clifton Strengths School. These resources, which represent research and application strategies from multiple perspectives, assist instructors in gaining a well-rounded understanding of not only Gallup's Signature Themes of Talent, but how these Themes connect to feelings of empowerment and professional engagement. To best assist learners in applying the strength's philosophy in their work and ultimately their career development plan, it is helpful to blend concepts from multiple authors (Table 2).

At this level, instruction is focused, yet responsive. The instructor plays an important function in tailoring the sessions based on learners' concerns and areas of difficulty. Many of the concepts in strengths instruction may initially appear counter-intuitive (e.g. spend more time on your strengths than your weaknesses) and must be explained. If questions and confusion are not addressed, it is difficult for learners to move on. As a result, an agenda for these sessions is needed, but must be refined and adjusted for each group.

It is recommended that instructors be prepared to discuss their journey with strengths and several specific examples of the effect of strengths in their careers. Demonstration of personal reflection and application not only helps illustrate

concepts, but also suggests the level of importance of this material in the eyes of learners.

The instructor must also have a working knowledge of all 34 Signature Themes and the ability to generate pharmacy related examples of each Theme's use on-the-fly. Although the books from the Gallup organization are easily digestible for most participants, these examples do not aid in understanding the implications of specific Themes within a pharmacy-specific context.

The instructor must recognize that significant discussion and learning is occurring outside the educational sessions as learners share with others who may or may not have had exposure to strengths training (e.g. spouses/significant others). With student pharmacists, peer-to-peer discussion is vital, particularly for those that are surprised by their assessment results and/or have an aversion to "personality tests." Discussion is preferred over lecturing to gain learner engagement with the material and enhance their ability to connect general Signature Theme information to their professional development.

Tom Rath's *Strengthsfinder 2.0* is sufficient for this level of instruction. Participants must complete the assessment online, prior to any educational sessions. They also read the book and, in particular, the descriptions related to their own Signature Themes. A brief, reflective assignment is used to assist learners in identifying the concepts from each description that resonate most with them and specific instances where they have used each signature theme in pharmacy. Many learners require this preparatory time in order to be able to participate constructively in educational sessions. This assignment then becomes the "entry ticket" to a two-hour workshop or online module.

To manage questions and assist with small group discussions, group sizes of 30 have been used. Residents and senior students are present to provide personal stories of using their strengths in pharmacy practice. Online asynchronous modules with narrated mini-presentations and discussion boards have also been used. However, both students and instructors have indicated that live sessions are preferred.

Individualized feedback is vital to learner success. Trained pharmacists have been used to review written assignments. Reviewers use rubrics to rate student work, as well as provide supportive, encouraging comments and suggestions. Similar to a coach, reviewers affirm examples and analyses that demonstrate meaningful connections made by the learner. However, reviewers also challenge learners by posing questions to assist in digging deeper or expanding further.

Even after preparatory work, a workshop and feedback on assignments, participants may still feel that strengths are “just another assessment,” having had many experiences with various inventories over the years. Although the sessions may be lively and students may vocalize the importance of strengths, one session will not reverse years of focus on weaknesses or leave them prepared to proactively hone their talents throughout their career. Follow-up is required. At a minimum, group or written reflections can be used quarterly to encourage learners to revisit the concepts and to examine use of their Signature Themes as they encounter new professional opportunities. Alternately, additional learning opportunities may be provided to move learners into the intermediate level of strengths learning.

#### *Intermediate Level*

In order to achieve the objectives in the Intermediate Level (Table 1), participants will need to make a commitment of time and a commitment to self-discovery. This level takes work and, ideally, some manner of personalized guidance from an experienced mentor. For these reasons, progression to this level is not likely available for each and every student pharmacist and/or pharmacist, at least not via a rapid or turnkey process. However, this Level is essential in developing individuals that are truly engaged, empowered and giving their best to pharmacy on an ongoing basis. This Level is also important for developing individuals capable of facilitating strengths work with others. For these reasons, investments in instruction at this Level are required.

Individual and group instructional activities are carefully sequenced to assist learners in their progression, but must be paced in a way that allows ample time for discovery and reflection. Instructors should be prepared to share personal weaknesses, strengths stories, and career decisions.

Instruction at the Intermediate Level requires personal knowledge of participants and a participant-instructor relationship that allows the learner to be repeatedly challenged in a constructive manner. Student pharmacists, in particular, often struggle with the development of strengths statements and thinking creatively about the management of weaknesses. One-on-one meetings have been found to be helpful.

#### *Advanced Level*

To appreciate this Level, a metaphor is needed. Pharmacy’s investment in the Intermediate Level strengths instruction is similar to developing reservists in the military. At the Introductory Level, professionals can be expected to be able to call on their strengths knowledge when requested or when

needed, but they may not use it regularly. This level of instruction does not develop strengths as a functional, regular, integral aspect of professional life.

Strengths instruction at the Intermediate Level is like building an army, while the Advanced Level is like developing a Marine. Learners must choose to attempt Intermediate and Advanced strengths learning as it requires significant personal motivation. At the Advanced Level (Table 1), student pharmacists and pharmacists are highly attuned to their own strengths and are being deployed in teams and organizations to assist others.

Instructors working with this level of learner must commit to conducting regular strengths-based evaluations and requiring strengths-based self assessments from participants. Learners have moved beyond identifying examples and are regularly examining performance. Learners assess the alignment of their responsibilities with their strengths and consider professional decisions to enhance their productivity and effectiveness as practitioners. Significant time is spent working on-on-one with individuals as they develop and refine personal strengths stories and strengths development plans.

#### **Discussion**

Introductory, intermediate and advanced levels of learning around strengths were defined as a direct result of experience developing and refining strengths instruction over several years. In addition to engaging many different audiences in pharmacy, benefit has been gained from studying strengths-related literature and receiving constructive feedback from hundreds of participants. This experience has allowed recognition of patterns in learner response and performance and ultimately allowed articulation of a logical progression of learning. Additionally, experience has provided an opportunity to consider which material is important for all members of the profession (e.g. recognizing one’s own talents) and isolate those concepts most relevant to selected audiences (e.g. ability to teach strengths concepts to others).

#### *The Benefits of Levels*

Given the resources required to initiate a strengths development program, it has been helpful to think in terms of levels. The articulation of levels has resulted in careful attention to instructional design. The presence of levels defines a progression of learning, which emphasizes the need to revisit strengths over time. Each level has a focus and purpose that allows the tailoring of content, exercises and assignments.

A full program will not be developed and implemented quickly. Articulating levels has encouraged the discussion of a roll out plan. As an example, after solidifying the introductory level with elective students, the authors' advocated for introductory level strengths instruction as mandatory learning activity within the curriculum. After all students were exposed to an introductory level of instruction, more advanced training for elective students was approached.

In addition, the articulation of levels has encouraged the growth of an instructor pool. As the original instructors became engaged in Intermediate Level instruction, new instructors were invited to become involved in the Introductory Level. New instructors can sit in on workshops, take time to develop their own skills and receive support from seasoned instructors, as they transition into this new area of instruction. A broadened pool helps to carry the load of expanded instruction. However, it also expands expertise, creates a community of dedicated supporters and, in general, increases the institutional commitment to strengths.

Finally, the articulation of levels also helps to focus the use of resources. Higher levels of learning require more intensive education, support and mentoring, as well as access to different types of learning opportunities, such as teaching. The presence of levels acknowledges that not every student pharmacist or pharmacist will be required to lead strengths development within an organization. However, those that are interested have an articulated, intentional process for personal development.

#### *Defining Target Audiences*

The audience for instruction affects the design of strengths instruction. Students enrolled in a PharmD program are an audience that would likely be a focus for any team seeking to develop strengths instruction. However, consideration of *when* students will engage this material is important. This is an area of learning that is most effective if developed into a thread that engages learners at multiple points in their development and potentially in multiple settings. Students could be encountering this material early in a curricular sequence (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> professional year), longitudinally through the use of learning portfolios, as part of IPPE or APPE learning activities, and through activities targeted to extracurricular student organizations or other venues. The specific opportunities that are most desirable and feasible are likely institution specific.

In addition to professional students, other audiences that instructors may wish to consider, include residents, graduate students, faculty and practicing pharmacists, including

preceptors. Before the instructional team begins to define learning strategies, it is helpful to consider whether these other audiences will be targeted, and if so, how instruction can be developed in a manner that is applicable to multiple audiences and efficient in its delivery.

Preceptors and faculty pose a special challenge for the design of strengths instruction. In addition to understanding strengths for their own personal development, they also need to understand the role of strengths in their teaching relationships. To meet both needs, it is often desirable to blend Introductory Level Objectives and also introduce basic teaching ideas and resources. Instructors often appreciate knowing the general prevalence of the Signature Themes in pharmacy, as well as specific strategies for discussing and applying Signature Themes in their particular learning environment.

#### *Observations*

The authors' earliest experiences involved delivering strengths instruction to audiences who self-selected to participate, whether they were students enrolled in an elective or pharmacists participating in continuing education programs. Overall engagement and feedback was highly positive. Over the past few years, introductory material has been brought to all student pharmacists at our institution. Not surprisingly, the response from students has become more uneven. As the student audience has expanded, some have failed to see the value of strengths. This phenomenon should be recognized by instructors and care should be taken to make a strong case for the value of strengths. It is helpful to bring comments, quotes and examples from pharmacists who can provide "real world" illustrations of strengths in action. It can also be helpful to describe how strengths concepts are being integrated into the work of Fortune 500 companies and how strengths are being used locally in pharmacy.

Many senior students have been particularly receptive to the potential role of strengths in differentiating themselves. Although all graduate with a Pharm.D. degree, not everyone will have the same strengths. New graduates have commented on the usefulness of strengths examples in job interviews. Their focused attention on exploring their strengths has reportedly allowed them to provide more concrete and meaningful illustrations of their abilities. As a result, assignments for fourth year students now encourage students to generate detail-rich examples and explain that these examples will be assets in communication with prospective employers.

Consistent with other topics that utilize a “levels of learning” approach, it is easy to assume that progression implies mastery at the previous level. While that may be true at a point in time, progression to the next level does not always mean continued competence at the previous level. Be prepared to “reach back” to previous learning objectives to reinforce terminology, the value of the strength’s philosophy and future opportunities for use of strengths. Despite apparent understanding, it is easy for learners to revert back to their cultural understanding of strengths-related concepts, such as focusing significant development energy on weaknesses. Instructors should be watchful for opportunities to return to and reinforce earlier concepts.

### Summary

A focus on identifying strengths and applying them to one’s career can be as important as learning pharmacology and physiology. Just as these basic sciences serve as a foundation for solid clinical skills, knowing one’s strengths and committing to finding a role in the profession that relies on one’s strengths creates a foundation for optimizing a pharmacist’s contributions to health care. Also, just as pharmacy education is built on a sequence of learning that starts with introductory material and builds over time, strengths education also has a learning progression. As the strengths philosophy and its connection to career development becomes more widely recognized by pharmacy educators, it is important to acknowledge that this material should be presented via a rational approach to a succession of learning opportunities. Identifying one’s Signature Themes is only a foundation. Educational opportunities are needed to support learners in considering how roles in pharmacy may align with these talents and in facilitating the development and use of the talents of others. A roll out plan for reaching various audiences and careful consideration of resources is also advised.

The future of the profession can be directly affected by the manner in which schools of pharmacy engage their students in this material. Alignment of one’s role with their unique talents helps to create employee and professional engagement. The profession needs all pharmacists to be productively engaged and lending their talents to the forging of relationships, the solution of problems, and the delivery of care. Recognition and using the talents of pharmacists across the profession is key to positioning the profession to best meet the drug therapy needs of society.

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**Table 1: Description of Introductory, Intermediate and Advanced Levels of Strengths Instruction**

Learning Objectives	Instructional Approach & Learning Activities
<b>Introductory Level</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Describe the value of the strengths philosophy and the StrengthsFinder® assessment to pharmacy</li> <li>• Recall responses to three strengths related myths</li> <li>• Explain your Top Five Signature Themes and the major concepts from those Themes that resonate with you</li> <li>• Define strengths and the intersection of knowledge, skills, and Signature Themes</li> <li>• Describe methods for working around weaknesses</li> <li>• Cite examples of recent uses of Signature Themes in pharmacy</li> <li>• Identify opportunities for future uses of Signature Themes in pharmacy (e.g. APPEs, career)</li> <li>• Discuss your Signature Themes with others</li> <li>• Examine your use of your Signature Themes as part of regular self-assessments of professional progress</li> </ul>	<p>Learner takes the StrengthsFinder assessment and participates in a two hour online module or live workshop that may be a part of a course, orientation or development program.</p> <p>Reflective assignments are used to explore salient aspects of the Signature Themes, as well as past and future uses of Signature Themes. Supportive and encouraging feedback is provided by seasoned, strengths-trained pharmacy professionals.</p> <p>Sharing in discussion groups is encouraged as well as sharing with family and colleagues.</p> <p>Opportunities to reflect on signature themes and identify further examples of use are explicitly provided over a period of time.</p>
<b>Intermediate Level</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discuss strengths as the intersection of knowledge, skills, and Signature Themes</li> <li>• Recognize signs of a strength</li> <li>• Monitor signs of strengths in yourself</li> <li>• Develop personal strengths statements</li> <li>• Demonstrate use of strengths with intention</li> <li>• Articulate a plan for working with your weaknesses</li> <li>• Describe the role of strengths in leadership</li> <li>• Examine and debate the role of strengths in management, teams and organizations</li> <li>• Examine the Signature Themes associated with Rath's domains of leadership</li> <li>• Introduce the strengths philosophy/concepts to others</li> <li>• Facilitate in strengths-related education</li> </ul>	<p>The learner monitors their professional life over an extended period of time in order to explore the intersection of knowledge, skills and talents for the identification of their personal strengths.</p> <p>Learning materials and discussions guide participants through progressively more complex topics related to their personal strengths development. Work also begins on concepts related to strengths in others.</p> <p>Personal mentorship is provided. In addition, learners encounter strengths in multiple venues (e.g. didactic, experiential, networking/mentoring) and discuss strengths with multiple seasoned professionals.</p>
<b>Advanced Level</b>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluate strengths "blind spots"</li> <li>• Create a personal strengths story</li> <li>• Detail a development plan for your Top Five Signature Themes and specific strengths</li> <li>• Analyze and investigate opportunities for use of strengths in future career</li> <li>• Lead introductory strengths education initiatives</li> <li>• Introduce strengths to an organization</li> </ul>	<p>Quarterly strengths evaluation and planning occurs with supervisors. The learner engages in examination of the impact of strengths on their personal performance.</p> <p>Opportunities to contribute to strengths-related education are identified, as well as opportunities to guide others in understanding and using strengths in practice.</p>

**Table 2: Resources on Strengths and the Clifton StrengthsFinder®**

Resource	Overview
<i>First, Break All the Rules</i> Marcus Buckingham, Curt Coffman	While not a “strengths” book (this book was published before <i>Now, Discover Your Strengths</i> ), it addresses the topic of employee engagement, which is ultimately tied to the role of managers in identifying and utilizing the strengths of their employees.
<i>Now, Discover Your Strengths</i> Marcus Buckingham, Donald O. Clifton	Initial book describing both the importance of strengths and the StrengthsFinder® assessment. Includes information relevant to personal application of strengths, but also applying strengths concepts to the development of teams and organizations.
<i>Strengths Finder 2.0</i> Tom Rath	Provides a succinct introduction to strengths and access to an updated version of the StrengthsFinder® assessment. Provides the reader with a personalized <i>Strengths Discovery and Action Planning Guide</i> .
<i>Go Put Your Strengths to Work</i> Marcus Buckingham	Moves beyond identifying and categorizing strengths and introduces readers to strategies for recognizing instances when one’s strengths are in play. Also provides access to a web-based tool for measuring strengths.
<i>Strengths Based Leadership</i> Tom Rath and Barry Conchie	This book takes strengths themes presented in previous resources and enhances their presentation for application by leaders in organizations. The book also provides access to the StrengthFinder® 2.0 assessment.
<i>Trombone Player Wanted</i> Marcus Buckingham	A set of videos that compliments content from the above books. Narrated content is enhanced with a story that illustrates the application of strengths within an individual and a group.

Figure 1: Audiences and Purposes of Strengths Instruction

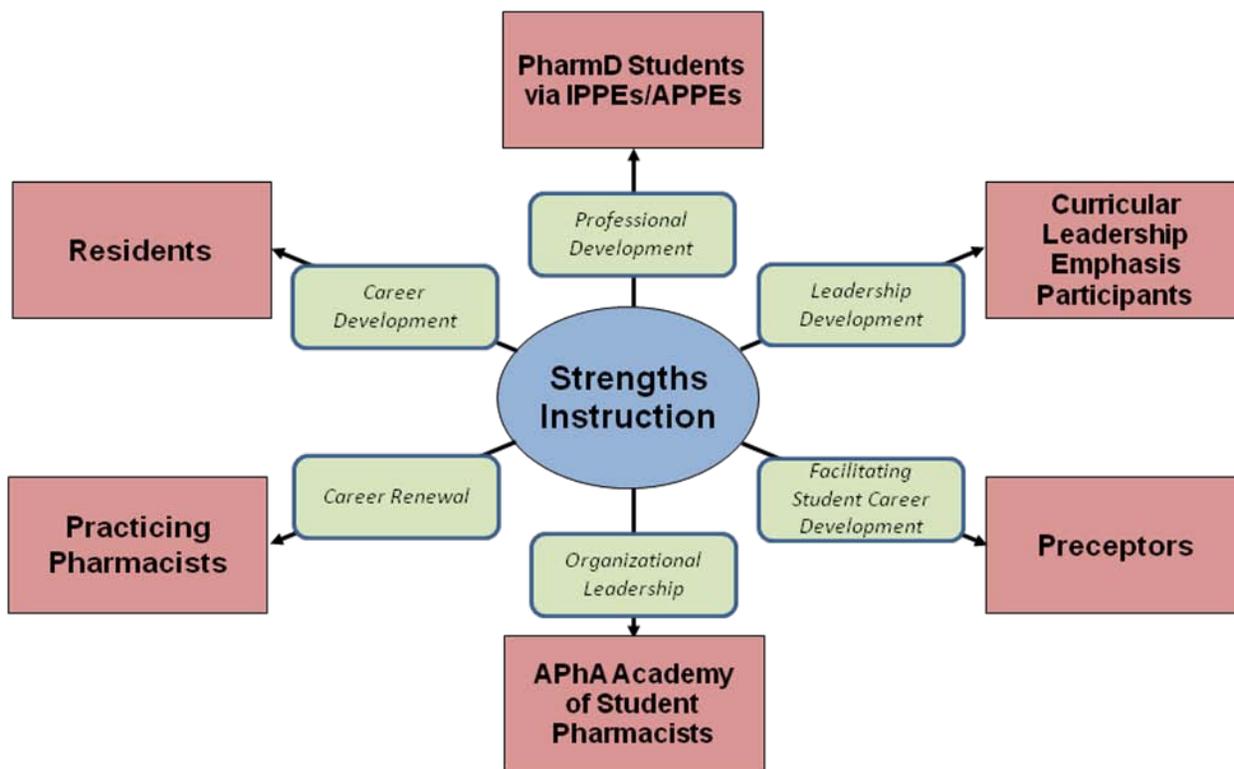


Figure 2: Evolution of Strengths Related Educational Initiatives at the University of Minnesota College of Pharmacy

