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What can StrengthsFinder® add to a pharmacy curriculum?

Brandon Young, Pharm.D.*

An Ancient Greek aphorism instructs individuals to “know thyself.” But, we aren’t philosophers or poets, we are pharmacists. We must “know pharmacy.” Our curriculum is filled with pharmacology, pharmacotherapy, and pharmacokinetics. These are the concepts that we must master to complete the coursework, graduate, pass the boards, get a job, and serve patients. However, while we are busy learning about pharmacy, we are missing a crucial component of our education. While we are taught about drugs, when do we gain knowledge about ourselves? While we are learning to critically evaluate therapy, when do we critically evaluate ourselves? Is there even time in an already packed curriculum to devote to introspection? In truth there is not only time, but also a great need for self-reflective coursework in the pharmacy curriculum. The time I spent exploring StrengthsFinder® helped me better understand myself and understand the need for self-reflection during pharmacy education. In addition, the use of the StrengthsFinder® can help improve team cooperation, promote leadership, and encourage the initiation and continuation of professionalism.

The health care landscape in America is rapidly changing. Services are becoming patient-centered and team-based. Health care professionals are asked to go beyond merely diagnosing and treating an illness to form a professional relationship with their patients and take a holistic approach to managing their health care. To best serve another, one must first understand themselves. Looking at other professionals, we see that future religious leaders undergo psychological examination and entire semesters devoted to introspective service learning. By understanding their own needs, they better understand the needs of those they serve. Likewise, the StrengthsFinder® encourages student pharmacists to explore their personality, traits, habits, and strengths.¹ In doing this, the future pharmacist will have a more developed understanding of themselves, which will help them better work with colleagues, serve patients, and identify job roles and tasks to which they are best suited.

The StrengthsFinder® program was developed by studying leaders, managers, and people who have accomplished great things. Completion of the StrengthsFinder® assessment provides students with their top five Signature Themes. When understood and coupled with natural traits and knowledge these themes become strengths. The basis of strengths psychology is that people who focus on their strengths, instead of their weaknesses, are more productive, happier, and have more significant accomplishments.^{1,2} Since

one of the goals of pharmacy school is to prepare student pharmacists to be agents of change in the world, StrengthsFinder® fits perfectly into the curriculum. When student pharmacists play to their strengths, they will find they naturally excel in their endeavors.

For many student pharmacists the first year of the pharmacy curriculum is the first time they have been exposed to the idea of “professionalism.” In practice professionalism permeates all that pharmacists do. Professionalism is not something that just happens; it requires initiative and commitment. Professionalism is defined many ways, but often calls for continual devotion to self-development. In the Oath of a Pharmacist, the American Pharmacist’s Association expresses that “[a pharmacist will] apply [their] knowledge, experience, and skills to the best of [their] ability to assure optimal outcomes for [their] patients”.³ StrengthsFinder® assists student pharmacists in reaching “the best of their ability.” By understanding functions in which they excel, student pharmacists are guided down practical paths toward the application of their knowledge, experience, and skills.

Likewise, the American College of Clinical Pharmacy, in their Tenets of Professionalism, explains that pharmacists “[will] strive for excellence and assume responsibility for [their] learning and professional development”.⁴ In utilizing the StrengthsFinder®, the student pharmacist is taking charge of their professional development. Indeed, when introduced in the first professional year, the StrengthsFinder® can lay the foundation for lifelong devotion to professional growth.

StrengthsFinder® is uniquely poised to support pharmacists in the transition to Continuing Professional Development (CPD). In 1974 the American Pharmaceutical Association-American Association of College of Pharmacy Task Force on Continuing Competence in Pharmacy released a paper stating that Continuing Education (CE), in its current form, fails to truly measure ongoing proficiency and new methods of assessing pharmacists are needed.⁵ Instead of focusing on event-based learning, as CE does, CPD aims to encourage continual development.⁶ StrengthsFinder® fits nicely into this model because it, too, encourages continual reflection and frequent evaluation of oneself. In fact, the StrengthsFinder® could be one evaluation tool that pharmacists use to identify on their learning needs as they utilize the CPD cycle.

While there are many tools available to aid student pharmacists in introspection and self-reflection, the StrengthsFinder® is distinctive in that it focuses on what one is already good at. Practitioners who look at the world through

this positive psychology of strengths are exactly what the pharmacy profession needs. Currently, pharmacy is faced with many challenges. A pharmacist's role in health care today is drastically different than it was fifteen years ago and will no doubt undergo further change in the next fifteen years. The utilization of StrengthsFinder[®] can produce pharmacists who know where and how they are best able to impact their world and create constructive change. These pharmacists have a "can do" attitude, contrasting the defeated attitude all too commonly seen now. These pharmacists will be more satisfied with their careers and seek out job duties that challenge and fulfill them. In this way, they will be leaders of change, innovation, and the continued progression of pharmacy practice.⁷

In conclusion, the incorporation of the StrengthsFinder[®] into the professional pharmacy curriculum can enrich student pharmacists' education by growing them as leaders and team players. It will kick off their lifelong journey of professional development and prepare them for ongoing personal evaluation demanded for CPD. Finally, it will equip them with the self understanding necessary for developing innovative practices and will thereby shape how pharmacy is perceived in the changing scene of American health care.

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