

## Strong Interest Inventory maximizes success for disadvantaged students

Located in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, Finlandia University has been committed to empowering students to improve the lives of people in their communities and throughout the world since its founding in 1896. However, they faced a challenge. How could they best serve disadvantaged students who needed extra help with career direction?

The concept of service lies at the center of the school's philosophy and mission. The faculty and staff work to graduate students who will use their time and talents to make positive contributions to society.

As career services manager for the TRiO Student Support Services program, Mark Cavis plays an instrumental role in Finlandia's career services function. Funded through the Department of Education, the federal TRiO programs are designed to motivate and support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, including low-income, first-generation college students and students with disabilities. During any given semester, Cavis works with as many as 60 TRiO students, providing the guidance they need to graduate and begin a fruitful career.

While Finlandia places great emphasis on helping students find a vocation that connects with their identity, passion, and purpose, Cavis believes that the disadvantaged backgrounds of the TRiO students he works with add an extra element of urgency to the task of getting them on the right career path.

### Business Challenges

- Students choosing majors for the wrong reasons
- Disadvantaged students needing more direction (choosing majors and careers) than the general population

### Company Profile

Finlandia University empowers students to improve the lives of people in their communities and throughout the world. Its philosophy and mission is based on service. Through the TRiO Student Support Services program, the school motivates and supports students from disadvantaged backgrounds, providing the guidance they need to begin a fruitful career.

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“Many of the students I work with have experienced challenges in school, so we want them to have an educational experience that fires their desire to learn,” said Cavis. “We have to help them believe that they can accomplish their goals.” This, says Cavis, involves creating an “encouraging environment” in which students have the support they need to succeed. And, as a large part of success entails choosing a career that suits their abilities and interests, Cavis places great emphasis on helping students find their ideal academic major.

## Solution

In order to accomplish this, Cavis relies heavily on the Strong Interest Inventory® assessment, a career guidance tool from The Myers-Briggs Company, which helps people identify possible careers based on personal interest.

The Strong tool helps students select a career by giving them insight into their interests, preferences, and personal styles. It enables them to identify specific courses, jobs, internships, and activities they’re likely to enjoy by comparing their results with those of like-minded people who have already found a satisfying career. It also generates a list of the top 10 occupations students are most likely to find rewarding.

Though the university has made the Strong available free of charge to all students for several years, Cavis greatly expanded its use when he arrived. Cavis works with students to overcome a myriad of problems related to their academic advancement. Often, however, it becomes apparent that the problem lies not with the student, but with the major itself.

“Sometimes students who come into my office wonder if their current career path is really the right one,” said Cavis.

Students, Cavis believes, choose their majors for a variety of reasons, many of which have little to do with the key factors that influence their chances for success—namely, interests, preferences, and personal style. It is not surprising that the advisement process reveals uncertainty. “Any time students express hesitation or

## Solution

- Use the Strong Interest Inventory assessment when counseling reveals a problem with the selected major
- Use the results for career exploration
- Direct students toward the majors that suit them best

“ The Strong is a useful, friendly tool that acts as a ship’s rudder to help students get to where they want to be. ”

**Mark Cavis,**  
Services Manager for  
the TRiO Student Support  
Services Program

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indecision regarding their academic path, I take that as a cue that they need to explore their options.”

In these cases, the first step involves having students take the Strong assessment. “As a resource, the fact that the Strong is very simple to use is advantageous,” said Cavis. “Students can easily access an abundance of information they can continually refer back to, providing a solid decision-making foundation.” Cavis then reviews the results with the students, which give them a snapshot of their interests and the kinds of careers that successful, satisfied people who share their interests have entered. He then assigns research projects and puts the students through a visualization exercise. “I’ll point out the highlights and ask them to ruminate over them for the next week or two, picturing themselves in various roles,” said Cavis. “When they come back, if there’s a role they can really envision themselves in, we investigate that career path further.

Though reactions vary, Cavis asserts that students are almost always pleasantly surprised by the kinds of careers that appear in their Strong results. In particular, they often find that the assessment points them to things that they enjoy but had not necessarily equated with a potential career.

“I think people forget that their interests are actually the best cue as to what they should do for a living. When something they like to do appears in their Strong results it often comes as a revelation,” said Cavis. “I use that interest and ‘revelation’ to help propel them into further career investigation so they can find out if that career is really for them.”

For example, Cavis recalls a case in which a student majoring in liberal studies came in and, under his recommendation, took the Strong. The results, it turned out, confirmed a long-held interest in forestry. Once that interest was identified, Cavis was able to connect the student with a person who worked in forestry and gave him a realistic view of what the job/industry was like. The student has now decided to pursue this career path. The Strong assessment, according to Cavis, exposes people to ideas that aren’t necessarily obvious but still directly relate to students’ interests.

## Results

- Students able to identify aspects of a career they would find both fulfilling and be successful in
- University offers a more comprehensive career counselling program to students
- Additional guidance helps retain students who would otherwise transfer or drop out
- Students put on a path to a fulfilling life that ultimately benefits the community at large

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In another instance, Cavis worked with a non-traditional student who was returning to school after an extended absence. Though she had already earned several college credits, she wasn't sure about her major. As Cavis puts it, she was in a very different place in her life than she had been the first time she attended college. Initially she had majored in pre-nursing, primarily because it was considered a high-demand career at the time. However, she had since married and started a family and now had very different reasons for wanting to pursue a career.

Recognizing a need for serious exploration, Cavis guided her to the Strong assessment. "Upon reviewing her results, I saw a smile on her face when the Strong linked her to a potential career in the culinary arts," said Cavis. "It turns out that she had a talent for cooking and food preparation and had thought before about starting a restaurant." After conducting additional research into career possibilities associated with the culinary arts, she is now planning to switch from her original major of pre-nursing to the business curriculum in order to prepare to open a specialty bakery.

Students, Cavis says, are often reluctant to switch majors, even if they're unhappy and performing poorly in their current major. Among the factors he has observed that keep them in those majors, Cavis lists parents' influence at the top, as well as preconceived ideas about the career that may not be fully in line with reality. Sometimes students don't realize the kind of academic demands involved in certain majors until they actually dive into them," said Cavis. "When reality hits—especially when it comes to the prerequisites—they begin to question their decision."

Cavis also lists the economy as a major factor in students' decisions, as students are at times reluctant to add an extra semester to their schooling, incurring additional debt, and so on. Students also often choose their major based on the economic outlook for that particular career. However, he is not shy about recommending that students make the effort to determine the right direction. "You're doing yourself an injustice by going to school and spending money to do something you don't enjoy," he said.

Furthermore, if students do not have a genuine interest in that field, they may find it difficult to succeed, regardless of the financial payoff. For example, Cavis worked with one student who was struggling in her physical therapy assistant major. "I did a bit of probing, and it turns out that compatibility and interest

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had very little to do with her choice of major,” said Cavis. This, she said, was a job that she believed brought a good salary and thought she “could do.” Upon talking with her a little further, however, Cavis discovered that she was having difficulty with some of the life sciences coursework—so much so that she was actually considering dropping out of school. Upon learning this, Cavis urged her to take the Strong and see what other options were available and is currently working with her to find an option more in line with her interests and talents. All this, he says, points to a need for students to be more fully informed about their career options.

Cavis takes the students he works with through the most thorough investigative process he can, fully utilizing his office’s library of occupational titles. The process, however, is most effective when it begins with a look at how students’ personal interests, preferences, and styles measure up to those of others in various professions.

## Results

The Strong, Cavis says, provides a foundation for investigation that helps students identify the fundamental aspects of the kind of career they ultimately want to build.

In addition to the benefits to students, using the Strong Interest Inventory assessment benefits the school. As Cavis puts it, the Strong assessment enables Finlandia to give its students a “complete educational package. By offering this kind of information and service, we’re providing a kind of safety net for students who might not be on the best course,” said Cavis. “We’re not only providing the education but also helping guide students to the particular education that will maximize their chances for success, both in school and in the workforce.”

Additionally, Cavis believes that using the Strong helps retain students who otherwise might transfer or drop out. He recalls one student who liked to work with his hands and was thinking of transferring to another school. Through counseling based on the Strong assessment, Cavis was able to help him find a major at Finlandia that was right for him.

Cavis’s ultimate goal is to place students on the path that will maximize their chances for success and fulfillment, and he draws tremendous satisfaction from helping students work toward graduation.

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“People derive a significant portion of their happiness—or lack thereof—from their work,” said Cavis. “Using the Strong and other tools, I’m essentially enabling them to enjoy their life more by helping them find the right path, and that is very satisfying to me personally.” By helping students identify careers that pique their interest, Cavis believes he is helping put them on a path to a more fulfilling life that will consequently benefit the community at large. At the same time, he believes this process enables the school to offer a more complete educational experience and keep students enrolled.

“If you don’t know where you’re going, how are you going to get there?” said Cavis. “The Strong is a useful, friendly tool that acts as a ship’s rudder to help students get to where they want to be.”



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The Myers-Briggs Company empowers individuals to be the best versions of themselves by enriching self-awareness and their understanding of others. We help organizations around the world improve teamwork and collaboration, develop inspirational leaders, foster diversity, and solve their most complex people challenges.

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