

Strengths Based Assessment: Predicting Student Success in an Online Graduate Leadership Program

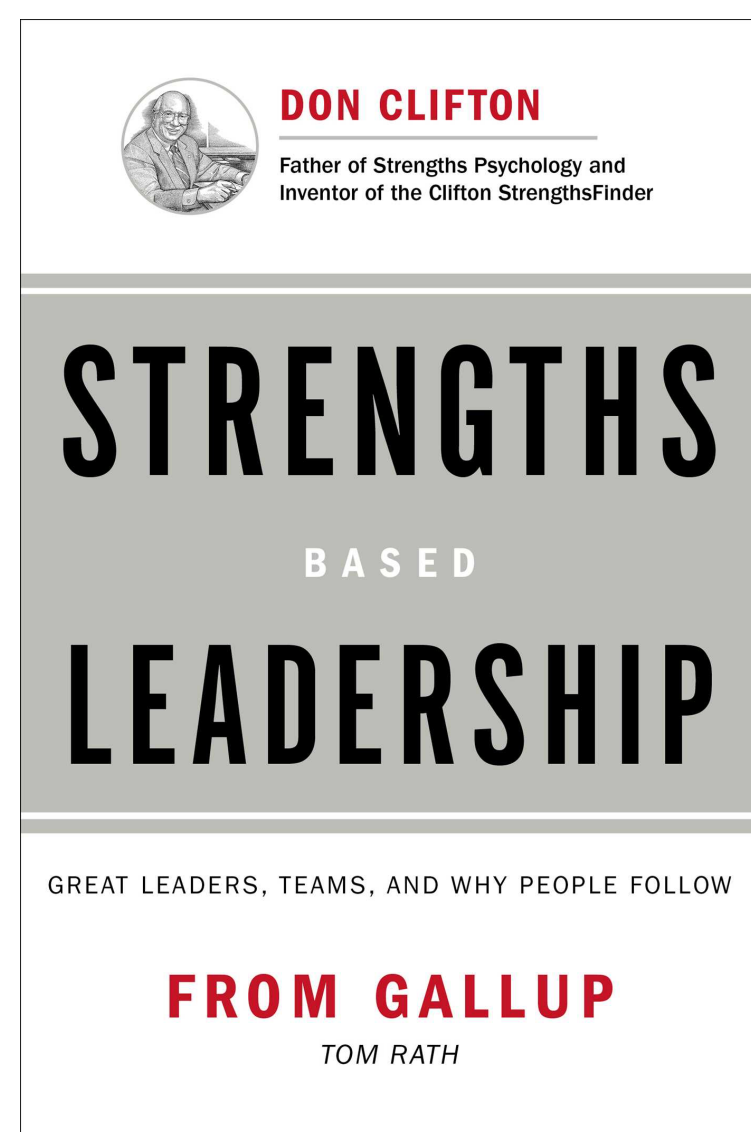
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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to describe online doctoral leadership students' signature themes from the CliftonStrengths assessment (Rath, 2007) and evaluate the predictive nature of these themes across a variety of student success indices. In anecdotal conversations with fellow program faculty over the past several years, loose ideas emerged about potential relationships between students' CliftonStrengths top-five themes and their general performance in the program. A deeper and more nuanced understanding about how these students' themes either contribute to their achievements or their challenges is important because it informs the relatively uncharted territory of graduate leadership education.

Background

Graduate and online education in the United States has experienced a profound shift over the last several decades and one of the results has been a surge in novel graduate program initiatives and a mainstream acceptance of the scholar practitioner model of doctoral study (Boud & Tennant, 2006; Boyer, 1990; Servage, 2009). There is a need for evidence-based best practices about how best to inspire and support these students through graduate academic programs. This research project serves as one such initiative.

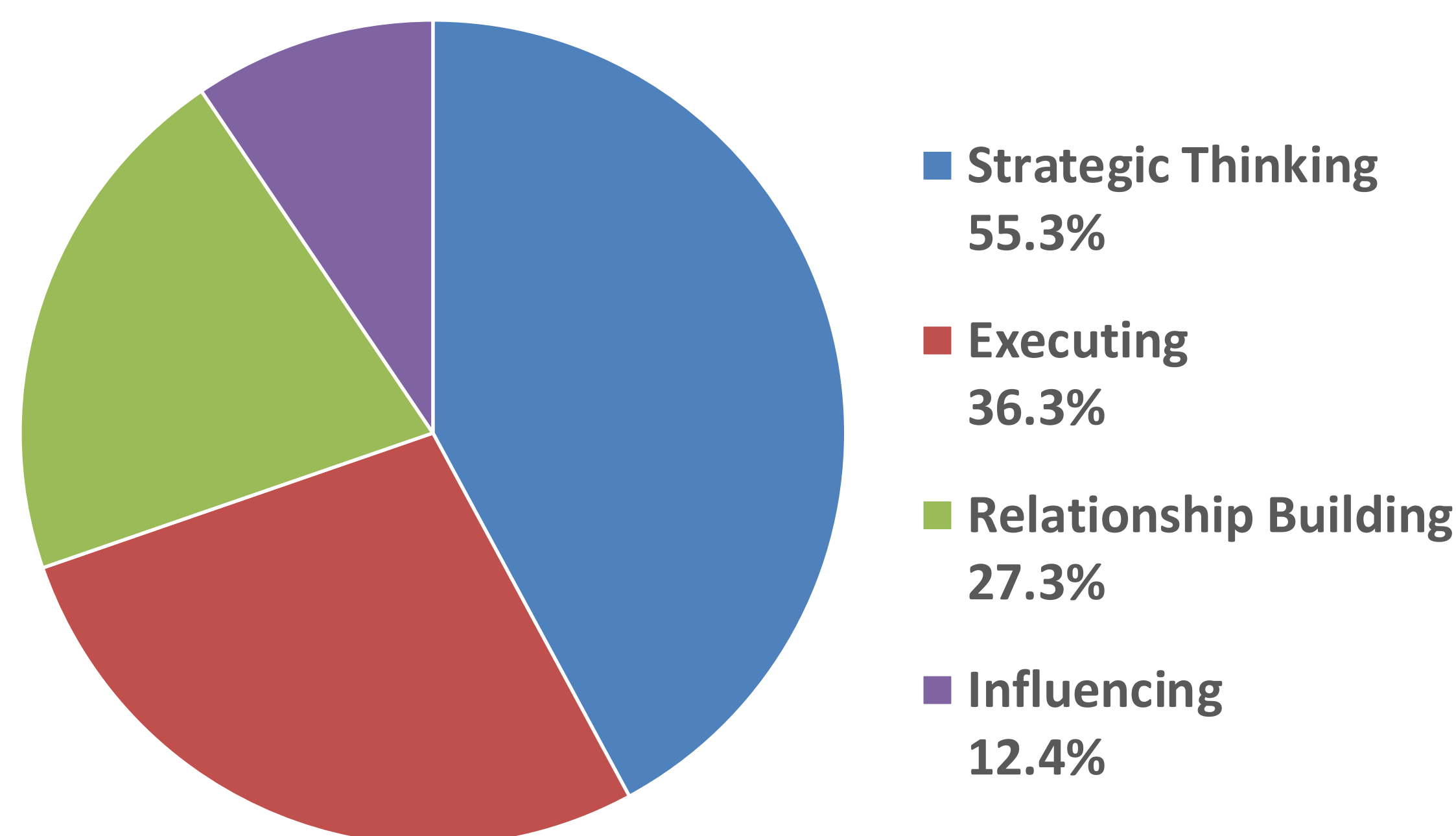


Demographics

N = 651 EdD Students

Gender: 48.3% female; 51.7% male
Ethnicity: 67.5% White; 11.9% Black; 3.8% Asian; 2% Hispanic; 12.1% declined to report
Status: 358 active students; 198 graduates; 124 withdrawn/dismissed; 8 leave of absence

Top Strengths Domains



Frequency of Students' Top-Five Strengths Themes

Strategic Thinking	Executing	Relationship Building	Influencing
Learner (57%)	Achiever (47%)	Relator (31%)	Activator (10%)
Strategic (35%)	Responsibility (26%)	Connectedness (19%)	Maximizer (10%)
Input (24%)	Arranger (18%)	Individualization (18%)	Communication (9%)
Intellection (18%)	Belief (12%)	Positivity (12%)	Competition (9%)
Futuristic (18%)	Restorative (11%)	Developer (10%)	WOO (7%)
Ideation (13%)	Discipline (7%)	Harmony (8%)	Self-assurance (6%)
Context (12%)	Focus (7%)	Adaptability (5%)	Significance (6%)
Analytical (9%)	Deliberative (7%)	Empathy (5%)	Command (4%)
	Consistency (3%)	Includer (5%)	

Bold indicates the most commonly occurring top-5 themes
Red indicates the least commonly occurring top-5 themes

Predicting Student Success

GPA

- **Activator:** Yes ($M = 3.98$); No ($M = 3.94$), $p < .001$
- **Competition:** Yes ($M = 3.98$); No ($M = 3.94$), $p < .001$
- **Consistency:** Yes ($M = 3.90$); No ($M = 3.96$), $p < .001$
- **Deliberative:** Yes ($M = 3.99$); No ($M = 3.94$), $p < .01$
- **Discipline:** Yes ($M = 3.99$); No ($M = 3.94$), $p < .001$
- **Input:** Yes ($M = 3.90$); No ($M = 3.96$), $p = .03$
- **Woo:** Yes ($M = 3.89$); No ($M = 3.95$), $p = .01$

Student Status

- **Focus:** $\chi^2(1, N = 305) = 6.00, p = .01, \phi = .14$ associated with a withdrawal or dismissal
- **Restorative:** $\chi^2(1, N = 305) = 4.52, p = .03, \phi = -.12$ associated with a withdrawal or dismissal

Time to Graduation

- **Significance:** Yes ($M = 32.59$); No ($M = 42.65$), $p = .01$

Leaves of Absence

- **Activator:** $\chi^2(1, N = 651) = 4.09, p = .04, \phi = -.08$ Associated with **not** taking a leave of absence
- **Developer:** $\chi^2(1, N = 651) = 8.22, p < .01, \phi = .11$ Associated with taking a leave of absence
- **Relator:** $\chi^2(1, N = 651) = 5.73, p = .02, \phi = -.09$ Associated with **not** taking a leave of absence

Conclusions

- Graduate leadership students trend heavily in the Strategic Thinking and Executing Domains
- There are small, albeit meaningful relationships between several top-five themes and student success indices
- Though not prescriptive, these findings provide opportunities for targeted support and embedded opportunities for reflection across several strengths
- The program may wish to explore a strengths-based advising model (Soria, Laumer, Morrow, & Marttinen, 2017)

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