

Building Community in the Veterinary Curriculum Using a Strengths Based Orientation Program

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Abstract

Background: Orientation programs have been linked to greater student engagement, retention and grade point averages. Few colleges of veterinary medicine have employed activities that foster self-awareness of strengths, values clarification or professional development as students enter health care professional programs.

Methods: This study assessed how an orientation program impacted participants': (1) confidence while meeting other students and faculty and in reporting inappropriate behaviors among their classmates and faculty/staff; (2) perceptions of their academic concerns; (3) comfort seeking out academic, social, and wellness resources; (4) students' likelihood to use and knowledge of how to access academic, social, and wellness resources; and (5) how StrengthsQuest skills differed among students before and after the orientation program.

Results: The findings showed a statistically significant increase in participants' confidence on the related indicators following the orientation program. Students' primary concern before and after the orientation program was academic success. However, the frequency of reported concerns about a sense of belonging decreased and concern about managing daily living expenses more than doubled. Comfort in meeting classmates and faculty increased significantly. Student' willingness to report inappropriate behaviors by fellow students and faculty increased significantly. Awareness and how to identify and use academic, social, and wellness resources on campus increased significantly, while the type of support they planned to seek in times of distress remained relatively unchanged.

Conclusions: Students indicated that the StrengthsQuest program provided them with greater insight about how to utilize their identified strengths. The findings support the continued use of StrengthsQuest in future orientation programs and suggest opportunities for follow-up study.

Keywords: Strength Based Orientation, StrengthsQuest, Safe to Fail, Professional Development

I. Background

Orientation programs are a common introduction to professional programs characterized by intensive curricula. Effective first-year experiences such as orientation programs have been linked to greater student engagement, retention and grade point averages [1-7]. Colleges of Veterinary Medicine around the country have utilized orientation programs that incorporate small and large group team building activities [8]. However these programs do not address components related to self-awareness of strengths, values clarification or professional development strategies for students who transition from undergraduate to health care professional programs. At the University of Florida College of Veterinary Medicine (UFCVM), we created an orientation program aimed at developing and maintaining a community of learners and educators. In previous orientation programs, there was no discussion about faculty expectations for students or student expectations of the program. Recognizing the limitations of past programs, faculty developed a proactive program aimed at helping all members of the college (faculty, students and staff) adopt a common language and that would promote a more positive and holistic approach to student professional development. Achieving these outcomes required laying this foundation prior to students' immersion into the curriculum. The purpose of this study was to assess the how the orientation program impacted participants': (1) confidence while meeting other students and faculty and in reporting inappropriate behaviors among their classmates and faculty/staff; (2) perceptions of their academic concerns; (3) comfort seeking out academic, social, and wellness resources; (4) students' likelihood to use and knowledge of how to access academic, social, and wellness resources; and (5) how StrengthsQuest skills differed among students before and after the orientation program.

Table 1. Learning objectives, new orientation activities, and survey items

Learning Outcomes	New Orientation Activities	Survey Items
Foster the creation of a learning community and culture of respect between classmates and faculty	When did you become a Gator? How did it feel to get into veterinary school? Zip Line, Ropes Course, Rock Wall Take a Seat, Make a Friend, Human Bingo	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As you prepare to enter vet school, what are you most concerned about? How do you feel about meeting your classmates? How do you feel about meeting your faculty?
Engage this community in discussions about expectations for each other, the faculty and the curriculum	Expectations contract Wellness seminar You matter, we care Conflict resolution Case studies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What are types resources do you anticipate utilizing while in vet school? Do you know how to access these resources on the UF Campus? In a situation where you are distressed, what kinds of support would you seek? How comfortable would you feel reporting inappropriate behaviors that you may encounter while in veterinary school, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior or sexual harassment by fellow students? How comfortable would you feel reporting inappropriate behaviors that you may encounter while in veterinary school, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior or sexual harassment by faculty or staff? How confident are you that veterinary school will be a 'safe to fail' environment where your classmates, staff and faculty will all be working as a team? What kinds of learning challenges do you anticipate in veterinary school?
Identify, develop and begin to learn how to apply each student's unique talents in order to achieve academic, career, and personal success	Strengths Quest 101 A piece of the puzzle Keeping your bucket full	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> What is your understanding of being a professional while representing our college and the university? How did the StrengthsQuest assessment help in identifying your personal strengths? Knowing your strengths, how confident are you in your ability to use them during veterinary school? Knowing your classmates strengths, how confident are you in their ability to interact as a team player? How confident are you in your faculty's ability to work proactively on your behalf?

Orientation program

A community of learners is described as a group of people who share 7 elements: history, identity, mutuality, plurality, autonomy, participation and integration[9-11]. With these elements in mind, selected activities for our new orientation program were those aimed at developing a cohesive and empowered student group who would recognize their own and each other's strengths. Orientation activities were linked to survey questions that were designed to assess the impact of the program (see **Table 1**). Three overarching objectives guided the development of the program:

Objective1. Foster the creation of a learning community and culture of respect between classmates and faculty.

We endeavored to foster the sense of community to signify that students, faculty and staff were working together towards the same goal – to make the UFCVM a place where everyone strived to help one another succeed and achieve both personal and group goals. Aimed at helping the students understand the history, identity and culture of our college, we used videos from across the campus to highlight special aspects, that celebrated the university including athletic program successes, inventions and national and international awards, clinical research breakthroughs, and outreach activities to underserved countries.

Our intention was to cultivate a college culture characterized by mutual respect and pride. Faculty participated in large group discussions to relay their sentiments regarding how they felt about being a part of UFCVM. Small group sessions were designed for the students to talk among themselves and with a second year students. During these interactions they shared how they felt when learning about their acceptance into the UF veterinary school. Large and small group conversation fostered opportunities to discuss the meaning of being a professional and how individual, classmate, and faculty behavior reflects back on individuals within the UFCVM. We also discussed the importance of being a lifelong contributor to the profession. Also, we offered examples such as volunteering at a community low-income clinic and traveling abroad to provide services to a third world low income country, and discussed the benefits of this type of service.

Objective2. Expressing the expectations for each other, the faculty, and the curriculum in community-wide discussions.

The next step was to create a feeling of unity among the class and a spirit of collaboration between students and faculty. To do this we addressed what mutuality, reciprocity, collaboration and cooperation look like in a learning community. We held small group break-out sessions followed by large group discussion regarding expectations from students, faculty and staff. Small group break-out sessions were prompted by the following questions: What expectations do you have of each other as classmates? What are expectations you have of your faculty? and What expectation do you think the faculty have of you as students? During small breakout sessions, faculty and staff had discussions of what expectations they had of the students. In the large group session, all of the participants developed a mutually agreed upon contract that articulated shared goals pertaining to communication, empathy, respect, and professionalism. Following this activity, we discussed creating a mutually beneficial 'safe to fail' environment whereby it was 'safe' for students to fail and stressed that it was acceptable, if not expected, to ask each other and their faculty for assistance. Moreover, we discussed that it was equally 'safe' for a faculty or staff member to fail and seek input from the students. This type of learning community was developed with the intent of fostering interdependence and reciprocity throughout the entire college. We also introduced students to campus resources readily available in the event they became overwhelmed or stressed. At the same time and consistent with being in a 'safe' community, we emphasized the importance of seeking help from any classmate, faculty member, or accessing a main campus resource whenever they felt this was needed.

Objective 3. Identify, develop and learn how to apply each student's unique talents towards achieving academic, career, and personal success.

The final step in building a learning community focused using the social interactions within groups to promote team-building and active engagement among learners. Through these interactions, students began to form support networks, study groups, enter into leadership positions and recognize the importance of diversity in strengths and talents among their peers.

A number of veterinary schools and other health professional schools still use the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) to help students to identify their personality types and discover work environments that align within their career choice [12-13]. The MBTI, although widely used by businesses and professional programs, has been criticized for its methodological weaknesses, poor statistical validity and low reliability [14-15]. We used a Gallup Education Practice tool, StrengthsQuest to help students identify their top talents/strengths [16]. After this task, we asked students to consider how their strengths could help them individually while collaborating with classmates to achieve their academic and career goals. By focusing on strengths and talents, we hoped to: (1) foster student self-awareness, (2) promulgate a common language to use when working in teams, (3) encourage respect for individuality, and (4) empower students to consider how they could use their strengths most effectively as team players and leaders during their veterinary curriculum. Faculty and staff members attending the orientation program took the StrengthsQuest and engaged in conversation with students and one another about their results. All participants were given printed name tags, imprinted with their top 5 strengths, to ensure their visibility while meeting a new person. By focusing on their strengths and using this language throughout the orientation and their curriculum, our intent was to foster an environment of positivity and reduce stress and burnout.

II. Methods

Several days prior to the orientation program, students were sent an email, using the professional encrypted version of SurveyMonkey, inviting them to participate in the study. The 15-item researcher-constructed survey asked questions related to participants' confidence in the safe to fail environment, academic concerns, comfort level in meeting other students and faculty, and their awareness and comfort level in seeking campus resources and comfort in reporting for inappropriate behaviors among their classmates, and faculty or staff. Students were also asked to indicate their awareness of personal strengths. Following completion of the orientation program students were invited to take the post-test version of the survey.

Four close-ended items were scored on a Likert-type scale where 1 = *Very Confident* 2 = *Confident*, 3 = *Unconfident*, and 4 = *Very Unconfident*. These items asked participants to indicate their level of confidence in assessing that the veterinary school will be a 'safe to fail' environment; their ability to use strengths during veterinary school; their classmates' ability to use strengths during veterinary school; and if the school will be a 'safe to fail' environment where classmates, staff and faculty would work as a team.

Students were asked what they were most concerned about in entering veterinary school. They were instructed to select one of five response categories: *Sense of belonging*, *Academic success*, *Managing daily living expenses*, *Maintaining personal relationships*, and *I have no present concerns*.

Next, four close-ended items were scored on a Likert-type scale where 1 = *Very Comfortable*, 2 = *Comfortable*, 3 = *Uncomfortable*, and 4 = *Very Uncomfortable*. These items asked participants to indicate their level comfort in meeting classmates and faculty; reporting inappropriate behaviors that they might encounter

while in Vet School fellow students and faculty/staff. Two questions required a *Yes* or *No* response and asked what types resources (academic, social, and wellness) they anticipated utilizing while in vet school and if they knew how to access these resources.

One question asked participants to rank order from a group of 11 choices (*Counseling, Friends, Family, Faculty, Veterinary Medicine Advisor, Associate Dean, Clergy, Significant other/ spouse, Classmates, Medical doctor, and Specific support groups*), the types of support they would seek in situations if they were distressed. Another question asked participants how the StrengthsQuest assessment assisted them in identifying their personal strengths, They were instructed to select one of four response categories: *Reaffirmed what I already knew, Provided greater insight about how to utilize my strengths, Provided new information about myself and Provided insight on how to use my strengths for professional growth.*

Two open-ended questions asked participants to describe their understanding of being a professional while representing the college and the university and to identify the kinds of learning challenges they anticipated having in veterinary school.

One hundred twelve incoming veterinary medicine students were invited to participate in the study. Ninety-eight students, 87.5% of the sample, completed the pre-test survey while 84 (75%) completed the post-test survey. Descriptive statistics were reported for close-ended responses. The dependent paired samples *t*-test was used to compare pre-test and post-test responses. For the question measuring the impact of StrengthsQuest, the chi-square test was used. All testing was set at a level of .05 to ascertain statistical significance. SPSS, Version 21 was used for all analyses.

For the open-ended questions, the text analysis feature of SurveyMonkey rank ordered the five most frequently occurring responses. Representative quotes exemplifying the responses were cited.

III. Results

Close-ended questions

Table 2. Confidence by mean, standard deviation, and level of significance

Item	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Significance (p-value)
How confident are you that veterinary school will be a 'safe to fail' environment where your classmates, staff and faculty will all be working as a team?	3.13 (.52)	3.68 (.47)	0.00*
Knowing your strengths, how confident are you in your ability to use them during veterinary school?	3.31 (.57)	3.56 (.50)	<.001*
Knowing that your classmates have different strengths, how confident are you in their ability to interact as a team player?	3.08 (.42)	3.48 (.60)	0.00*
How confident are you that veterinary school will be a 'safe to fail' environment where your classmates, staff and faculty will all be working as a team?	3.10 (.50)	3.61 (.52)	0.00*

* denotes statistical significant differences between pre-test and post-test

Confidence

Participants' confidence that the veterinary school would be a 'safe to fail' environment significantly increased after orientation from a mean of 3.13 to 3.68 ($p=.00$). Confidence in the ability to use their reported strengths during veterinary school increased significantly from 3.31 to 3.56 ($p<.001$). Additionally, participants' confidence in their classmates' ability to interact as team player increased significantly from 3.08 to 3.48, ($p=.00$). Participants were confident they were that the veterinary school would be a 'safe to fail' environment where classmates, staff and faculty would work as a team. There was a statistically significant increase in the mean score from 3.10 to 3.61 ($p=.00$) following orientation (see **Table 2**).

Table 3. Concerns by percentage and frequency

Item	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)
As you prepare to enter veterinary school, what are you most concerned about?		
Sense of belonging		
Academic success	15.31% (15)	4.76% (4)
Managing daily living expenses	63.27% (62)	61.90% (52)
Maintaining personal relationships	7.14% (7)	21.43% (18)
I have no present concerns	11.22% (11)	9.52% (8)
	3.06% (3)	2.38% (2)

Concerns

Participants reported that academic success was their biggest concern prior to (63.27%, $n = 62$) and after orientation (61.90%, $n= 52$). To lesser degree they reported concerns about a sense of belonging prior to orientation (15.31%, $n =15$) although this concern diminished to 4 (4.76%) in the post-test. Concerns related to

managing daily living expenses more than doubled in number to 18 (21.43%) from seven (7.14%) in the pre-test. Concerns related to maintaining personal relationships or having no concern at all was relatively unchanged from the pretest to the posttest (see **Table 3**).

Table 4. Comfort by mean, standard deviation, and Level of Significance

Item	Pre-test (SD)	Mean	Post-test (SD)	Mean	Significance (p-value)
How do you feel about meeting your classmates?	3.01 (.64)		3.40(.54)		0.00*
How do you feel about meeting your faculty?	3.10 (.64)		3.44 (.55)		0.00*
How comfortable would you feel reporting inappropriate behaviors that you may encounter while in veterinary school, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior or sexual harassment by fellow students?	3.00 (.73)		3.38 (.61)		0.00*
How comfortable would you feel reporting inappropriate behaviors that you may encounter while in veterinary school, such as cheating, unprofessional behavior or sexual harassment by faculty or staff?	2.91 (.81)		3.4 (.61)		0.00*

* denotes statistical significant differences between pre-test and post-test

Comfort

Participants reported level of comfort in meeting classmates was significantly different from the pretest to the posttest and increased from a mean score of 3.01 to 3.40 ($p=.00$). Participants' comfort in meeting faculty increased significantly from 3.10 to 3.44 ($p=.00$). Participants' comfort in reporting inappropriate behaviors by fellow students (i.e., cheating, unprofessional behavior or sexual harassment) during veterinary school increased significantly from 3.00 to 3.37 ($p=.00$). Their comfort in inappropriate behaviors by faculty during veterinary school increased significantly from 2.91 to 3.40 ($p=.00$). (see **Table 4**).

Table 5. Resource awareness and use

Item	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Significance (p-value)
What are types resources do you anticipate utilizing while in vet school?			
Social	.79 (.05)	2.70 (.05)	0.005*
Wellness	2.48(.06)	2.58 (.06)	0.160
Academic	.79 (.05)	2.10 (.09)	0.001*
Do you know how to access these resources on the UF Campus?			
Social	.71 (.05)	.99 (.01)	0.000*
Wellness	.71 (.05)	1.00(.00)	0.000*
Academic	.79 (.05)	.97 (.02)	0.000*
In a situation where you are distressed, what kinds of support would you seek?***	Family 2.59 Friends 2.76 Classmates 3.86 Significant other/spouse 3.91	Family 2.68 Friends 2.94 Significant other/spouse 3.98 Classmates 4.02	

* denotes statistical significant differences between pre-test and post-test

*** = average rank

Resource awareness and use

Participants' expectations of using academic, social and wellness resources increased for each type. However following FLE2, there was a statistically significant greater likelihood for using social (.79, SD =.05 to 2.70, SD =.05, $p = .005$) and academic (.79, SD=.05 to 2.10, SD =.09, $p = .001$) resources. Participants' knowledge about how to access academic, social, and wellness resources while in veterinary school was significantly higher in the post-test ($p = 0.000$) compared to pre-test. Thus, student awareness of how to access campus resources increased significantly as a result of participation in the program (Table 5). Participants were asked to rank 11 potential sources they might seek during times of distress. The top four ranked responses were the same for both the pretest and posttest: Family, friends, classmates, and significant other/spouse.

Table 6

Impact of StrengthsQuest assessment

Item	Pre-test Mean (SD)	Post-test Mean (SD)	Significance (p-value)
How did the StrengthsQuest assessment help in identifying your personal strengths?			
Reaffirmed what I already knew.	35.71% (35)	15.5% (13)	
Provided greater insight about how to utilize my strengths.	38.78% (38)	70.2% (59)	0.00*
Provided new information about myself.	19.39% (19)	4.8% (4)	0.00*
How to use my strengths for professional growth?	6.12% (6)	9.5% (8)	

Impact of StrengthsQuest assessment

The distribution of choices was significantly different ($p = 0.00$) in the post-test compared to the pre-test for two of the response choices. In post-test, students were more likely to indicate that the StrengthsQuest *Provided greater insight about how to utilize strengths* (38.78%, $n = 38$, and 70.2%, $n = 59$) and less likely to report that the StrengthsQuest *Provided new information about myself* (19.39%, $n = 19$ and 4.8%, $n = 4$) (Table 6). There were no statistically significant differences for the response choices, *Reaffirmed what I already knew* (35.71%, $n = 35$ and 15.5%, $n = 13$) and *How to use my strengths for professional growth* (6.12%, $n = 6$ and 9.5%, $n = 8$).

Open-ended questions Student responses to the question, *What it does means to be a professional?* on the pre-test coalesced among five most frequently cited words: **respectful** 29.59% (29), **university** 29.59% (29), **college** 26.56% (26), **manner** 25.1% (25), and **school** 19.39% (19). The percentages add up to more than 100% because there is an overlap in the words used by the respondents. **Respectful** was described as how an individual presents herself that in turn reflects on the college. “Being professional while representing the college for me includes being **respectful** of the college and other students, not discussing cases/issues I see with people outside of the college, and being a respectful person outside of the college.” **University** referred to how an individual presents herself and how that reflects on the university. “My understanding of being a professional while representing our college and the university includes behaving in a manner that reflects the **university** in a positive light. Being respectful of others, gracious, and thoughtful are a few ways to accomplish this.” **College** was described to as how individual comportment reflects on the college. “I will represent the University of Florida by meeting all of the standards set by our **college**. As a member of [the college of veterinary medicine], I will strive to uphold the prestigious reputation of the [redacted] through my interactions in the professional environment.” **Manner** refers to one’s behavior and actions. “I know that I must act in a respectful and professional **manner**. My actions, both good and bad, may reflect back to the university/vet med program”. **School** referred to how an individual’s behavior reflects on the school. “I understand that as a student of the vet school I am considered a professional student. As such I should conduct myself in that manner, as a representative of myself, my profession, and the **school**”.

On the post-test, the five most frequently cited words were: **college**, 32.14% (37), **acting**, 28.57% (24), **manner**, 26.9% (22), **professional** 20.47% (17) and **dress appropriately**, 17.86% (15). **College** was exemplified by comments such as, “Knowing that my actions can reflect back to the **college** even when I am not at a **college**-sponsored event. I should conduct myself in a way that I would not be embarrassed to be seen by my colleagues or superiors.” **Acting** was described as how one behaves, such as, “**Acting** appropriately to your job, wearing professional clothing that would be appropriate for clients to see you in, being respectful of faculty and classmates at all times”. **Manner** was defined as how individuals represent themselves, the college and school. “Recognizing that you represent the college in and out of school and presenting yourself in a respectful **manner** to your peers and your superiors”. **Professional** referred to comportment or conduct. “Being a **professional** means considering your actions and appearances at all times and maintaining a respectful, presentable character. It means knowing that you are no longer representing yourself, but an entire microcosm of people who you consequently reflect on”. **Dress appropriately** related to the ways in which individuals attired themselves. “Professionalism in every aspect. Way of speaking/communicating with others, being respectful, **dress appropriately** in front of clients and other clinicians”.

On the pre-test when asked what kinds of learning challenges do you anticipate in vet schools, the five most frequently cited words: **management**, 27 (27.55%), **challenges**, 21 (21.43%) **school**, 21 (21.43%), **amount**, 19 (19.39%), and **understanding**, 6 (6.12%). The following quotes reflect participant remarks. Regarding management, participants shared that “I expect to be presented with a great deal of information in a short time, and I must learn how to **managemy** time wisely to learn everything” while another participant anticipated “some difficulty adjusting to a heavier workload and more difficult course material. I think I will have to make some adjustments in how I **managemy** time and how I study”. Challenges were described as “acclimating to the new manner in which I will interact with my classmates. In the past, I viewed classmates as competition, but now they will be more like family. Also, “changing my study habits to retain the maximum amount of information and remembering that information for the rest of my career will most definitely prove to be a **challenge** for me.

Another representative comment was, “There will be a **challenge** of having to commit so much new information to long term memory, however, I believe I will be able to overcome this in order to achieve my goal of becoming a veterinarian”. **School** was referred to in the following way. “I think that vet **school** is going to test my confidence in my academic abilities, and the ability to pick myself back up again and regain composure even after I have made mistakes or done less than ideally on an exam”. Another participant anticipated “having to rework my study habits and adapt to the stress of the veterinary work load. I will have to readjust my personal life to complement my **school/work** life”. One participant “most worried about my academic performance. **Amount** was described by the following comments. Veterinary school is very fast paced and the classes will contain large **amounts** of information in short amounts of time. I just hope I will be able to absorb all the information I need in order to be successful in such a fast paced environment”. Another participant was concerned with “Learning how I study best and retaining large **amounts** of information”.

Participants referred to **understanding** in very different ways. With my specific learning style, I often have to re-listen/re-watch and then perform a concept before **understanding** it. During my undergraduate at UF many of my science/math classes were recorded online which allowed me to catch ideas that I didn't previously **understand** in lecture. I am concerned that the different curriculum style, and high volume of workload, will be a hard adjustment for me”. Another reported having a “good **understanding** of small animal medicine but no large animal medicine experience so even learning things like equine anatomy will be hard for me” but expressed a more personal concern. “I also foresee my husband and I having a strained relationship because he doesn't **understand** what grad school is like and his way of “helping” me is not helpful. Some type of orientation for spouses would be great for people like us”.

On the post-test the five most frequent responses were: **learning**, 27 (32.14%), **study**, 22 (26.19%), **amount**, 16 (19.05%), **management**, 15 (17.86%), and **challenges**, 13 (15.48%). **Learning** was exemplified by statements such as, “not getting grades that I am used to and stressing about it, but recognizing that it is less of a competitive environment here and more of a chance to **learn** what is needed to be a successful vet” and “I predict that I will have to **learn** how to manage my time wisely with classes, clubs and friends. I will need to put in a large amount of time and effort for studying”. Students described **study** as: “Trying to **study** effectively and efficiently while maintaining peace of mind and personal relationships” and “I anticipate a struggle to **study** most efficiently, because the time I will have to allocate to any specific subject will be less than I am used to having. There will be so much information to learn in a relatively short time”.

Participants referenced **amount** as the “Volume of work [and] ability to keep up with the **amount** of work [and] finding methods to remember the material” and “Learning the **amount** of information needed in such a short **amount** of time before the exam”. Regarding **management** participants expressed concerns about “Being able to **manage** my time and money appropriately while still achieving success” and anticipating challenges with “maintaining the balance between personal life and school, time **management** and academic success”.

One participant discussed prospective **challenges** as “I anticipate to be academically **challenged** due to the heavy loads of material covered in each course. I think I will have to reevaluate how I study to make the best use of my time”. Another participant reported, “**Challenges** regarding the amount of learning material. Adjusting to a new style of studying”.

IV. Discussion

The finding showed there was a statistically significant increase in participants' confidence: (1) that the veterinary school will be a ‘safe to fail’ environment, (2) in their ability to use their strengths during vet school, (3) in classmates' ability to interact as a team player, and (4) that the veterinary school will be a ‘safe to fail’ environment where classmates, staff and faculty would work as a team. Major concerns that remained were stresses common to professional programs: academic success and financial concerns [16-17]. Discussing stresses such as these and others, and providing information about how to find help if they felt overwhelmed was intentional and thought to be an important and crucial first step in creating a learning community.

The orientation program was designed to help students learn how they could utilize their attributes. To maximize their experiences in their professional curriculum and career, the program provided opportunities for students to develop self-awareness centered on knowing their personal strengths and talents. Creating opportunities for meaningful and relevant discussions in, fostered kinship and shared language. Students' open-ended comments and the finding that they were far less concerned about having a sense of belonging within the veterinary school following orientation activities supports this observation. Shifting students' belief from a perspective that they need to ‘survive’ their professional degree program, to one in which they will ‘thrive’ [18] will, ideally, result in continued synergy for the college and help them remain engaged.

To assess the sustained impact and benefit of the described program, further steps must be initiated. First, to be effective, the strengths-based discussions must continue throughout the curriculum and become incorporated within the scope of college-wide social, didactic and clinical interactions. Second, all faculty and

staff should be familiar enough with the program such that they can easily emphasize strengths in any given situation. Third, it will take a long-term college commitment and continued use of this program before tangible benefits, such as professional and personal student/college successes will be evident. Future studies using individual or focus group interviews with students and graduates who participated in a strengths-based curriculum may provide additional insights regarding how the program impacted students' career decision-making processes.

V. Conclusion

As the findings show, the activities described in this orientation program are transferable to other institutional undergraduate and graduate degrees that utilize a similar approach to familiarizing students to new programs. Future studies should explore other implementations of this orientation program and evaluate the short and long term impact on: (1) career choices, (2) team building and (3) student experiences in cultures that promote team building and a 'safe to fail' environment.

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