

Finlandia University—Guiding Students to a Fulfilling Life of Service

School's TRiO Program Uses CPP, Inc.'s *Strong Interest Inventory*® Assessment to Maximize Disadvantaged Students' Chances for Success



CASE STUDY AT A GLANCE

THE ORGANIZATION

Finlandia University is committed to empowering students to improve the lives of people in their communities and throughout the world and bases its philosophy and mission 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.

THE CHALLENGE: FINDING THE RIGHT PATH

The disadvantaged backgrounds of TRiO students add urgency to the task of identifying the career paths that maximize their likelihood of success. Students, however, often choose majors for reasons unrelated to key factors underlying success, such as interests, preferences, and personal style. Without a genuine interest in their field, students may find it difficult to succeed.

SOLUTION

When counseling reveals a problem students are having with their selected major, the first step is to have them take CPP, Inc.'s *Strong Interest Inventory*® assessment. The results serve as a basis for career exploration that ultimately directs students to the major that suits them best, thus maximizing their chances for success.

RESULTS

The *Strong* enables Finlandia to give its students a complete educational package by guiding them to the right curriculum and helps retain students who otherwise might transfer or drop out. The process puts students on a path to a fulfilling life that will benefit the community at large.

A UNIVERSITY FOUNDED ON PRINCIPLES OF SERVICE

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

According to Finlandia, a career is more than a means to earn a living. This philosophy is expressed throughout the school's Web site, which points out that the term *vocation* is derived from a Latin term that means "to call." A vocation, it asserts, is a "calling" to serve the common good through responsible action. The university holds that vocation is directly tied to identity, passion, and purpose.

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.



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THE CHALLENGE: FINDING THE RIGHT PATH

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. “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. In order to accomplish this, he relies heavily on the *Strong Interest Inventory*® assessment, a career guidance tool from CPP, Inc., that helps people identify possible careers based on personal interest.

THE SOLUTION

The *Strong* 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 in fall 2006, particularly stepping up its use in 2008.

THE ADVISEMENT PROCESS

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 whether 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, therefore, that in many cases the advisement process reveals uncertainty. “Any time students express hesitation or 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.

INTEREST—A KEY TO SUCCESS

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.

OPENING NEW DOORS

The *Strong* assessment, according to Cavis, exposes people to ideas that aren't necessarily obvious but still directly relate to students' interests. For example, he worked with a nontraditional 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.

A CHANGE WORTH MAKING

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."

“ 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

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 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. The *Strong*, he says, provides a foundation for investigation

that helps them identify the fundamental aspects of the kind of career they ultimately want to build.

OFFERING A "TOTAL EDUCATION PACKAGE"

In addition to the benefits to students, using the *Strong Interest Inventory* assessment benefits the school. As Cavis puts it, the *Strong* 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.

A SATISFYING ENDEAVOR

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.

"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."

CONCLUSION

As a university that equates *vocation* with *calling* and views occupation as the way individuals harness the power of their identity, passion, and purpose for the greater good, Finlandia places great emphasis on helping students find the career that best suits them.

According to Cavis, the *Strong Interest Inventory* assessment is a primary element in a thorough investigatory process that helps students identify the career that will maximize their chances for success and enjoyment. 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."

About CPP, Inc.

At CPP, our only job is to help you be a better HR professional and, in turn, help every employee flourish. While we're best known for our products, like the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*® assessment, CPP is also a group of people who can offer you the information, guidance, and support you need.

We offer solutions to help you improve organizational performance and address whatever challenges you face—from team building, leadership and coaching, and conflict management to career development, selection, and retention. Perhaps that's why millions of people in more than 100 countries use our products each year. They include individuals at Fortune 500 companies and businesses of all sizes, as well as educators, government agencies, and training and development consultants.

Since its founding in 1956, CPP, Inc., has been a leading publisher and provider of innovative products and services for individual and organizational development. Available in more than 20 languages, the company's hundreds of products help people and organizations grow and develop by improving performance and increasing understanding. Among CPP's world-renowned brands and services are the *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*®, *Strong Interest Inventory*®, *Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument* (TKI), *FIRO*®, *CPI 260*®, and *California Psychological Inventory*™ (CPI™) assessments, and CPP Professional Services.

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Talk to us today to see how.**

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