

## **Determining the Value of Personality Assessments as Academic Advising Tools by Collecting Qualitative Feedback: Our Exploring Students' Views on the MBTI, Strong Interest Inventory, and StrengthsFinder**

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### **Introduction**

Since the 1940s, academic advisors have been using instruments like the Strong Interest Inventory (SII or Strong), Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), and Clifton StrengthsFinder in their appointments. One goal in using these assessments is to help connect exploring students to a college major (Gillispie, 2003). My advising office at the University of Utah, the Academic Advising Center (AAC), is devoted to serving a population of exploring students; we use these three assessment tools in student appointments and major exploration classes. These tools are revered as valuable—and sometimes necessary—components for helping students explore, identify, and possibly declare an academic major.

At the U, however, our use of these assessments does not yet include the opinions of our key stakeholders: the exploring students themselves. As advisors in the AAC, we want and need to know more about our students' perspectives. How do our students see these assessments? Do they view them as particularly useful or effective? Why or why not? To determine this, we will solicit student feedback regarding the Strong, MBTI, and StrengthsFinder. This is the first step in an ongoing process to determine the overall value of each of these assessments. Future studies will focus on which assessment most effectively connects students to their majors, allowing our office to determine which test or tests justify training expenditures. To train an advisor to interpret all three assessments costs approximately \$6,089 (GS Consultants, 2018; The Myers-Briggs Company, 2018; Gallup, Inc., 2018b). Given that our office's goal is to have all main advisors trained in each assessment, and that we have approximately 13 such individuals, the AAC has spent or will spend over \$79,157 to make each advisor Strong-, MBTI-, and StrengthsFinder-certified. Nearly \$80,000 is a steep figure, especially for our office's modest budget. Thus, determining which assessment tool is most effective from a student's perspective offers a twofold benefit: we can increase student satisfaction and possibly save our office thousands of dollars per year.

This proposal will outline a method to determine which assessment tool(s)—the Strong, MBTI, or StrengthsFinder—is or are the most preferred from our students' perspectives. We will also solicit feedback regarding each assessment's effectiveness in connecting undeclared students to a major; this efficacy will be measured by AAC student learning outcomes related to identifying decision-making styles and values. Through surveys and interviews of students taking our Major Exploration class, UGS 1050, we will solicit feedback for these assessments as students are utilizing them in their major exploration process. At the project's end, we will be able to identify the instrument or instruments that is both most well-received by students and which, from their point of view, most effectively delivers the AAC's learning outcomes. Ultimately, this proposal is intended as a first step in identifying best-practice assessment tools for the field of major exploration advising; doing so might even subsequently reduce our office training budget.

## Background

The SII or Strong was first created in 1927 and assesses an individual's interest in six broad occupational categories: Realistic, Investigative, Artistic, Social, Enterprising, and Conventional (CPP Inc., n.d.). The MBTI was developed in the early 1940s, first distributed for research use in 1957 and then finally for commercial use in 1975. This assessment measures a person's preference for behavior across four dimensions: Introversion vs. Extroversion, Sensing vs. Intuition, Thinking vs. Feeling, and Judgement vs. Perception. (Pittenger, 1993). Gallup originally developed StrengthsFinder in 2001; an updated version was released in 2007. StrengthsFinder provides individuals with a ranking of their natural talents across 34 themes, listed in order of ability (Gallup, Inc., 2018a). Academic advisors began using these tools in their appointments as early as World War II, when it first became popular to classify an individual's interests and abilities via measurement (Gillespie, 2003). Research from the last thirty years is predominantly in support of these tools in advising and underscores their positive impacts on students.

Authors call for using the Strong, MBTI, and StrengthsFinder both individually and jointly in advising. Pulver and Kelly (2008) agree that administering the Strong provides "optimal" results for connecting students to careers (p. 617); Gordon and Carberry (1984) believe the MBTI helps students understand their strengths and weaknesses as well as how they gather information. Finally, Soria, Laumer, Morrow, and Martinen (2017) reported that knowing their strengths helped students select a major. Katz and Seaman (1999) call for jointly administering the MBTI and Strong to students for greatest self-understanding and certainty of goals, while Owens, Motl, and Krieshok (2016) similarly recommend using Strong and StrengthsFinder together to facilitate career exploration. Clearly, advisors are in favor of using assessments in advising, and there is much research that speaks to the efficacy of these tools in our appointments; however, few studies have been completed to assess which tool or tools *students* prefer.

This study will change that. By collecting feedback from a population of exploring students, I will ask students which assessment tool—the Strong, MBTI, or StrengthsFinder—they prefer and why. Finding students' preferred assessment tool will ultimately allow the AAC to determine which of its services are most meaningful and of highest positive impact to students. This information can then serve as a model to other advisors or advising centers who wish to offer assessment tools to students but are unsure where to start.

## Methodology

The approach to gathering data for this project will be qualitative: we will seek students' feedback regarding the Strong, MBTI, and StrengthsFinder assessments via posttest surveys (Katz, Joyner, & Seaman, 1999). Our population of students will be selected from a course taught by my office: UGS 1050, Major Exploration. While this study is inherently limited in that students self-select to take the course, our office primarily sees self-identified exploring students, so the study should still yield valuable data.

In UGS 1050, we help students learn more about themselves as they identify their values and decision-making styles; one way we do this is by administering the Strong and MBTI

assessments as course assignments. To complete this study, administering the StrengthsFinder assessment would also be incorporated into the course. Students would then complete posttest surveys to provide their opinion of each of the assessments. In order to solicit a viable amount of qualitative feedback, completing these surveys would be required assignments in the course.

The surveys would collect data in two areas. First, we would ask students general questions related to what they objectively thought of a given assessment and if it was helpful in exploring or declaring a major. We would also ask questions related to two AAC learning outcomes: 1) Advisors should recognize a student's decision-making style, and 2) Students should identify their values (as they might relate to a major or career). Refer to Appendix I for a sample survey related to the MBTI (note that the same description and questions would be used for soliciting feedback for the Strong and StrengthsFinder assessments as well).

The assessment with the most positive responses—indicated by verbiage like “helpful,” “great,” “liked,” etc.—will be concluded to be the one students prefer. Similarly, positive responses to the learning outcome questions can help the AAC determine which assessment tool is most effective at helping advisors and students understand decision-making styles and identify values. If the survey responses yield inconclusive results (no overwhelmingly positive or negative responses), we will conduct focus groups and interview students one-on-one to gain additional feedback.

### **Conclusion**

The Strong, MBTI, and StrengthsFinder assessments are valuable major exploration tools for the AAC. However, we might not be using these assessments in the most effective manner. By administering the Strong, MBTI, and StrengthsFinder to our UGS 1050 students and subsequently collecting qualitative feedback from them, we can begin to determine which tool students prefer—and, as a result, we can begin to explore which assessment most effectively delivers AAC learning outcomes. The results of this research provide a twofold benefit. First, identifying the preferred assessment tool can provide a rationale for discontinuing training in certain assessments, saving our office thousands of dollars. More importantly, collecting preliminary data regarding the efficacy of our learning outcomes will pave the way for future studies in this area, perhaps even allowing the AAC to develop a best-practice model in the field of major exploration advising.

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# **Appendix I: Sample Student Survey**

## MBTI Survey

The Academic Advising Center (AAC) wants to know what you thought of the MBTI we administered to you in UGS 1050. Specifically, we are curious if this assessment helped you to explore and/or declare a major. We also want to know if this assessment helped you to define or articulate your decision-making style and your values as they pertain to a major or career. This survey is completely anonymous. All answers will be kept strictly confidential.

1. Are you currently undecided on your major?

- Yes
- No

2. Did you find the MBTI helpful in exploring majors?

- Yes
- No

3. Why did you or didn't you find the MBTI helpful in exploring majors?

4. Did the results of your MBTI make you reconsider the major or majors you are interested in?

5. Did the MBTI play a part in how you selected a major? (If you are still undecided, please indicate if the MBTI made it more difficult to select a major.)

6. Would you recommend the MBTI to another student who is exploring majors?

- Yes
- No

7. Why would you or wouldn't you recommend the MBTI to another student who is exploring majors?

8. Did the MBTI help you identify your decision-making style? (For example, Procrastinating or Agonizing.)

- Yes
- No

9. How did the MBTI impact how you identified or did not identify your decision-making style?

10. Did the MBTI help you identify your values? (For example, Flexibility or Security.)

- Yes
- No

11. How did the MBTI impact how you identified or did not identify your values?

12. Is there anything else you would like us to know about your experience with the MBTI?

13. Finally, of the three assessments you completed—the Strong, MBTI, or StrengthsFinder—which did you prefer and why?