



FINLANDIA UNIVERSITY

# Helping Students find their Identity, Passion and Purpose using the Strong

As career services manager for the TRiO Student Support Services program for Finlandia University, Mark Cavis plays an instrumental role in the University's career services function. The 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. "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. 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.

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.

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."

## CASE STUDY

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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.

"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."

In addition to the benefits to students, using the Strong 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."

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."

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