

## Case Study

## A Strengths-Based Approach to Career Services in Higher Education

1.6x

Bentley students who report having a strong understanding of their strengths are 1.6 times more likely to say that the university prepares them well for life outside of college.

Source: GALLUP

## SITUATION

**TO OPTIMIZE STUDENT OUTCOMES** and help graduates successfully transition to the workforce, Bentley University sought to adapt its existing career services to better align with the current demands of the workforce. While the university has successfully prepared graduates for their careers for decades, leaders aimed to create a more holistic career development experience for each student.

Seeing the positive impact of Gallup's StrengthsQuest — an assessment that helps students discover, develop and apply their strengths in and out of the classroom — in several university departments, Bentley sought to more intentionally infuse strengths in its career services programs. The university partnered with Gallup to develop a systematic, data-driven strategy for effectively framing career services in strengths.

As the top-ranked school for career services, according to *The Princeton Review*, Bentley understands the effectiveness of developing individuals' natural strengths rather than focusing on their shortcomings — a proven approach to student development. Gallup finds that supportive relationships, experiential learning and investment in students' strengths improve outcomes, including increased likelihood of being engaged at work, feeling prepared for life outside of college and believing their education was worth the cost.

**Gallup's research of over 1.2 million employees globally shows that strengths-based organizations have better sales, profit and customer engagement, among other key outcomes:**

- 10% to 19% increased sales
- 14% to 29% increased profit
- 3% to 7% higher customer engagement
- 6% to 16% lower turnover (low-turnover organizations)
- 26% to 72% lower turnover (high-turnover organizations)
- 9% to 15% increase in engaged employees
- 22% to 59% fewer safety incidents

To ensure that Bentley graduates are equipped to obtain great jobs and lead great lives, the university uses the Gallup-Purdue Index as a platform for providing deeper and more meaningful student experiences. For example, Bentley leaders emphasize mentorship and internship opportunities that expand on classroom learning.

Bentley University has utilized CliftonStrengths and Gallup's research about critical undergraduate experiences to maximize the effectiveness and impact of their student programs. As a result, Bentley is helping future workforce leaders develop their strengths and also providing critical undergraduate support and experiential learning opportunities that optimize undergraduate experiences and prepare students to thrive after graduation.

## APPROACH

### *Meeting Student Needs*

**BENTLEY UNIVERSITY IMPLEMENTED THE GALLUP COLLEGE STUDENT SURVEY** to gauge students' experiences in school and life. The survey includes items and scales that measure what is *right* with students rather than what is wrong with them. Along with the Gallup college student survey, Bentley also leveraged Gallup's StrengthsQuest and findings from the Gallup-Purdue Index to create an environment that is data-driven and student-centric.

### *Focusing on Strengths*

Based on the results of Gallup's findings, Bentley University implemented a comprehensive strengths-based approach to professional and personal development programs. Key steps to the initiative include:

- creating two immersive career exploration courses for first-years and sophomores, with a 99% participation rate for first-year students
- certifying Bentley University Career Services staff members as Gallup-Certified Strengths Coaches who are tasked with designing strengths-based career curricula and teaching and advising students
- providing faculty and staff with access to the CliftonStrengths assessment and professional development opportunities that focus on maximizing and advancing strengths to better achieve program goals
- creating a *strengths fellows* program in which students advise their peers on strengths-based approaches to academics and extracurricular programs
- implementing a strengths-based approach to students' first-year experiences, helping them understand one another's strengths, proactively leverage their talents for better living environments and facilitate diverse interactions throughout the community
- developing a new strengths-based model for wellness education that encourages development in each Wellness Educator's top five strengths as well as academic and career interests

Bentley University knows that finding a great job and leading a great life after college begins with self-awareness. By identifying how each student naturally thinks, feels and behaves, faculty trained in strengths-based development can help students leverage their talents more effectively and, thereby, learn the best ways to grow and succeed.

Gallup research shows that two-thirds of employees who strongly agree that their manager focuses on their strengths or positive characteristics are engaged with their work, whereas among employees who strongly disagree with this statement, the percentage of engaged workers plummets to just 2%. Teaching faculty, staff and students how to identify and maximize potential through strengths-based development helps individuals as well as businesses.

### ***Focusing on Student Experiences***

**DRAWING UPON KEY FINDINGS IN THE GALLUP-PURDUE INDEX, BENTLEY UNIVERSITY** emphasized six key experiences linked to successful college outcomes among graduates nationally, such as workplace engagement, high well-being and feeling prepared for post-collegiate life.

These crucial collegiate experiences hinge on student support and providing opportunities for experiential learning. Gallup found that graduates who strongly agree that they had the following experiences as undergraduates have double the odds of being engaged in their work and thriving in overall well-being:

1. Their professors cared about them as individuals.
2. They had a professor who made them excited about learning.
3. They had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams.
4. They had an internship or job that allowed them to apply what they were learning in the classroom.
5. They worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete.
6. They were extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations.

Internships and long-term projects allow students to apply abstract classroom concepts in real, tangible ways. Through this type of learning, Bentley students gain valuable experience and skills to help them succeed in not only *finding* jobs, but also excelling in their roles. Through its partnership with Gallup, Bentley embedded experiential learning in its curricula — setting students up for more seamless transitions from school to the workplace.

Along with internship opportunities, having a mentor who encourages students to pursue their goals and dreams enhances their development and preparation for life outside of college. Bentley University understands the importance of encouraging students to seek out mentors early in their professional careers and, therefore, creates opportunities for alumni to directly contribute to students' experiences on campus.

Because mentorship centers on forming connections with others, Bentley also teaches students the importance of relationship-building skills in the workplace.

To help students succeed after graduation, Bentley implemented programs to ensure that every student receives vital support and experiential learning opportunities. For example, the university employs the following best practices:

- provide access to technology that matches students with Bentley alumni for professional development and mentorship
- maintain an employer advisory board that provides a feedback loop to ensure that career services initiatives are relevant and value-added
- offer career guidance with a peer-to-peer mentorship program that pairs older students with younger students for ongoing support
- allow students to earn credit hours for internships completed while attending Bentley

## IMPACT

**THE RESULTS OF BENTLEY UNIVERSITY'S 2015 COLLEGE STUDENT SURVEY** clearly show the benefits of leveraging strengths to prepare students for their lives and careers after college. Bentley students who report having a strong understanding of their strengths are 1.6 times more likely to say that the university prepares them well for life outside of college. These students are also 1.9 times more likely to be confident that they will obtain a good job after graduation.

The findings demonstrate that focusing on students' strengths at Bentley University improves their preparation for life after college. However, helping students become aware of their strengths is only the first step in capitalizing on them. To achieve the greatest strengths gains, organizations need to commit to developing each contributor's strengths. Among Bentley students, those who strongly agree that Bentley University is committed to building the strengths of its students are 1.8 times more likely to be confident that they will find a good job after they graduate and 2.5 times more likely to say that Bentley University is preparing them well for life outside of college.

I know I will find a good job after I graduate.	Bentley University is preparing me well for life outside of college.	Strengths Items
1.9x	1.6x	I know my strengths.
1.8x	2.5x	This school is committed to building the strengths of its students.

**RESULTS FROM THE FIRST AND SECOND GALLUP-PURDUE INDEX NATIONAL REPORT** show that among college graduates nationally, those who received support and participated in experiential learning had nearly *double* the odds of being engaged in their work and thriving in all five elements of well-being.

### *Experiential Learning*

Bentley's 2015 student survey asked six questions about the support they receive and the opportunities they have to learn by experience. Gallup found that Bentley students who receive support and opportunities for experiential learning are more confident about their prospects after graduation.

For example, students who have had an internship or job that allowed them to apply what they were learning in the classroom are two times more likely to believe that they will find a good job after they graduate and that Bentley is preparing them well for life outside of college. Additionally, Bentley students who have worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete are 1.7 times more likely to say that they know they will find a good job after they graduate and 1.6 times more likely to say that Bentley is preparing them well for life outside of college.

## Support

Bentley's emphasis on mentorship is a successful strategy: Students who report that they have a mentor who encourages them to pursue their goals and dreams are 1.7 times more likely to say that they know they will find a good job after they graduate and 1.8 times more likely to say that Bentley is preparing them well for life outside of college.

I know I will find a good job after I graduate.	Bentley University is preparing me well for life outside of college.	Experiential Learning and Support Items
2.0x	2.0x	I have had an internship or job that allowed me to apply what I was learning in the classroom.
1.7x	1.6x	I have worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete.
1.6x	1.5x	I am extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations.
1.7x	2.2x	My professors at Bentley University care about me as a person.
2.0x	2.7x	I have at least one professor who makes me excited about learning.
1.7x	1.8x	I have a mentor who encourages me to pursue my goals and dreams.

Gallup continues to support the innovative efforts at Bentley University as it strives to better prepare graduates to become leaders in the workforce using strengths-based development, student support and experiential learning opportunities. By leveraging a combination of strengths-inspired coaching, mentorship, research and technology, Bentley sets the gold standard for career services and preparing students for the 21<sup>st</sup>-century workforce.

## ABOUT

Bentley University is a private, coed university located just nine miles from Boston, Massachusetts. Founded in 1917, the university offers its students a total of 24 majors and 35 minors. With the help of Gallup, Bentley has taken an innovative approach to the student experience that focuses on helping students obtain great jobs and lead great lives after graduation.

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