The family of the late Dr. Donald O. Clifton ‘48, ‘49, ‘59 and ‘90 had long been connected to the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. For two decades, he worked at Nebraska as a popular instructor and researcher, and it was at Nebraska where he first began his experimentation with strengths.

“My dad was born on a humble sheep farm in Butte, Nebraska. A regent scholar born with a little higher IQ than everyone else, he was a master teacher. What he noticed was weaknesses don’t turn into strengths. For 40 years, nobody listened to him, but he never gave up,” shared Don’s son, Jim Clifton, chairman and CEO of Gallup. “Now, CliftonStrengths® is everywhere. It serves as a perfect model for how a Nebraskan built something that changes the world.”

To further Don’s mission, the Clifton Foundation and Gallup announced in June 2015 their $30 million gift to establish the Clifton Strengths Institute through a partnership with the College of Business at Nebraska. The institute provides enhanced training and coaching on strengths-based leadership, early identification of high-achieving students with leadership and entrepreneurial abilities in the Clifton Builders program, and research support for faculty and students.

“The Clifton Strengths Institute is created with a focus on identifying and maximizing talent and to help Nebraska, the nation and the world to identify the next generation of high-achieving leaders, entrepreneurs and business builders,” said Dr. Kathy Farrell, James Jr. and Susan Stuart Endowed Dean.

In its first five years, the institute has become a national model for strengths-based education by offering top-quality personal, professional and leadership development. The institute has positively impacted students by coaching more than 3,000 students on their Top 5 CliftonStrengths, training over 230 student strengths coaches and developing more than 120 students in the Clifton Builders program. Guided by its student-led mission, the institute challenges students to stretch, disrupt and transform so they can lead successful lives and the future of business.
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Every year, first-year students in the College of Business at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln identify their strengths and integrate into the Nebraska Business community by taking the required Investing in Strengths (BSAD 111) course. They use the CliftonStrengths® assessment to identify their strengths, participate in group activities and learn from guest speakers who explain how their strengths help them in their respective fields.

Throughout the semester, students meet individually and in groups with strengths coaches. These coaches are UNL students who have been trained to help others develop their strengths to maximize their potential. With better knowledge of their CliftonStrengths, students learn to leverage themselves in academics and career awareness, as well as engagement and well-being in college.

“Transitioning from high school to college often brings big challenges,” said Dr. Tim Hodges, executive director of the Clifton Strengths Institute. “Students receive frequent feedback during their first few weeks on campus that informs their identity. Our focus in BSAD 111 is to ensure that our new College of Business students receive positive feedback, with an intense focus on helping the students build their character and reach their potential. The CliftonStrengths assessment and our time in class gives students a good foundation, but the most impactful development often happens when they meet one-on-one with our amazing student coaches.”

After completing the application and interview process in the fall semester, selected coaches enroll in the three-credit-hour Strengths Coaching, Theory and Practice (MNGT 451) course in the spring. The class functions as a training course for new student strengths coaches, providing an in-depth knowledge of strengths-based development and enhancing the skills necessary to succeed in positively impacting student development.

“In this course, strengths coaches develop their talents and gain the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to successfully coach their students in the fall to build lives of meaning, purpose and impact,” said Samantha Kennelly, associate director of the Clifton Strengths Institute.
“Selected students have the passion and energy to positively impact the lives of others and the natural talent to easily connect and communicate with people to help steer their development,” Kennelly said. “First-year students experience the most success when our coaches recognize their unique potential and guide them to succeed by leading with their strengths.”

Student strengths coaches facilitate their strengths teams of 10 students to help them collaborate cohesively based on their respective strengths. The teams complete a five-week project focused on creating a meaningful college experience to improve their future career engagement and overall well-being.

Each student will also participate in two individual coaching sessions with a student strengths coach, who will personally assist the student in making the transition to university life and help them to prepare for their future.

Holly Pham, student strengths coach and business administration major from Lincoln, Nebraska, jumped at the chance to be a student strengths coach. She wanted to be of service to younger classmates.

“The day I decided to be a student strengths coach was the day I knew I was going to make a difference in someone’s life,” said Pham. “Nothing is more satisfying than helping a freshman see their potential. After a coaching session, I can immediately tell they feel more confident with themselves in utilizing their strengths to succeed.”

The Clifton Strengths Institute (CSI) is committed to the enhancement of strengths-based knowledge and practice within higher education. The CSI now has more than 20 partnerships with various organizations on campus to provide one-on-one coaching and strengths-based workshops to enhance self-awareness and individual and team performance across campus.

One of these partnerships includes the Office of Global Studies which hosts the Mandela Washington Fellowship for Young African Leaders program, sponsored by the U.S. Department of State. During their six-week leadership institute at Nebraska, 25 emerging civic engagement leaders participated in faculty and staff led sessions on business, entrepreneurship and utilizing their strengths. Thembi Zulu decided to apply for the program when she noticed a gap in recreational safe spaces between men and women in Zimbabwe she wanted to bridge.

Creating ideas had never been an issue for Zulu, whose ability for innovative ideas comes naturally. However, when she began to see her innate talent as a weakness, she fretted over her abilities.

“Learning about my strengths helped heal a lot of things and restore a confidence in me because I was constantly being told you’re the loud mouth or you’re bossy, those labels that had been placed upon me. It’s not only addressed things before me, but now it’s also helped me set a better future and a better plan for me to proceed with my life. Knowing what your strengths are is a great leap to discovering that million dollar question of why are you here,” said Zulu.
Although all College of Business students receive strength training to enlighten their careers and personal lives, some student strengths coaches delve further through an Advanced Strengths for Coaches and Managers (MNGT 398) course. These students learn how to make an immediate impact by coaching fellow students, co-workers and members of their community to help transform lives.

Tyler Clark, a senior management major from Omaha, Nebraska, took the advanced strengths course and witnessed his classmates carrying the strengths message to local churches, fraternities and sororities, as well as Lincoln businesses. As an intern at Nelnet, he knew he would need to raise his game to make an impact with colleagues.

“Nelnet is already engrained in a strong strengths-based culture, so I knew I had to bring something different to the table beyond basic strengths insight reports,” said Clark. “This challenge motivated me to create new engaging curriculum which I taught to managers and executives.”

Clark, who cited Dr. Tim Hodges, executive director of the Clifton Strengths Institute, as an inspiration for his talks, gave three presentations: “Leading High-Performance Teams,” “How to Manage: From a Strength-based Perspective” and “The Boss to Coach Conversation.”

“Beyond the group presentations, I did one-on-one coaching sessions with the managers and executives to help them further discover their talents, learn how to invest in themselves and develop into even better leaders and coaches for their employees. I gained a lot of exposure within the company, developed my own abilities as a coach and sharpened my large group presentation skills. Through all that, I now see the advanced coaching course was a defining moment in my college career,” he said.

Connor Castleman, senior management major from Omaha, Nebraska, and a colleague of Clark at Nelnet, also enrolled in the advanced strengths course. His experiences with...
“Taking the Advanced Coaching Class was a chance for me to build on what I had already learned and used from the training for coaching first year students in BSAD 111. This class took that foundation of knowledge and added a depth of managerial and coaching techniques. Finding an organization like Jacht, that I was so passionate about, gave me the chance to present CliftonStrengths® in a workshop setting, and help them build and engage with a strengths-based mindset. I was able to take what I learned in the classroom and immediately turn around and try out the techniques,” said Collin Fink, senior advertising and public relations major with minor in business from Hebron, Nebraska.

strengths at the College of Business allowed him to reimagine where his career might lead.

“When given the opportunity to take the advanced strengths course, I couldn’t wait to expand the mission of strengths across the city of Lincoln,” said Castleman. “The advanced coaching course has a unique design where the main objective is to engage in one-on-one coaching or strengths workshops with businesses in Lincoln. This outreach stretched my learning and leadership experience further than I ever thought a college student could experience.”

Similar to Clark, Castleman brought his new expertise to Nelnet. He developed a coaching role he now attests accomplishes his original goal for attending college.

“Entering my freshman year at the College of Business, I didn’t know where I would find a home for my interests in sales, psychology, leadership and the business world. My professional coaching became for me what every college student is looking for – a way to transition what I learned in college to the real world. I got to sell, coach, lead and learn more about the business world, and will always be grateful for these unique experiences the advanced strengths coaching course provided,” he said.
The Clifton Builders Program is a one-of-a-kind program which focuses on putting entrepreneurial-minded students in a setting where they can learn and grow by using their strengths to make a positive impact in business.

The program stemmed from needs identified by Jim Clifton, Gallup chairman and CEO, who saw the necessity to boost young entrepreneurial-minded people. The Clifton Builders program at Nebraska became the first program of its kind offered at the college level in 2016. Nebraska is the only institution with a three-year curriculum with three tracks, a major and a minor, as well as co-curricular involvement like student mentors and one-on-one coaching.

Clifton believes the program has the potential to not only give cohort members the best chance to succeed personally, but also to provide direction so they can impact the world in a positive way. He hopes the program will contribute to turning around what he sees as the decline of free enterprise over the past several years.

“The program was created to find and develop entrepreneurs, startup types, rainmakers and extraordinarily talented salespeople and leaders – people who have a natural gift to create economic energy where none existed before,” said Clifton. “Big business is in a full recession. The United States has an oversupply of innovators and an undersupply of entrepreneurs.”

Program selection happens through applications, interviews and Gallup’s Builder Profile 10 (BP10) assessment, which identifies strong entrepreneurial mindsets. Students begin the program with the Clifton Strengths Institute during their sophomore year in a cohort setting that fosters comradery and teamwork. The program offers three tracks – business, team and community builders – and connects students with a Gallup-certified strengths coach to help them understand and maximize their unique set of talents.

Dr. Tim Hodges, executive director of the Clifton Strengths Institute and assistant professor of practice in management, believes the Clifton Builders management major and minor equip students with the tools to build, lead and manage people. Experimental learning, core to the success of the program, provides students with
elite real-world experiences that will make them a disruptive force in industry. In addition to their track of focus, students attend networking events, activities within the College of Business, business-related field trips and more.

“The students in our Clifton Builders program have natural talents that help them create a positive impact in their communities, businesses and teams,” said Hodges. “They have been called ‘disruptive,’ a term not always seen as a positive. But we believe there is no changing the future without disrupting the present. Disruption is not a threat – it is an invitation to move on and to redefine normal.”

Hodges added, “These students have what it takes to lead us to a better future and we are doing everything we can to help make that happen.”
Increasing Employee Engagement in Local Business

Jordan De Spong
Going beyond startup strategy such as product development and creating value, students in the Clifton Builders program learn to approach engagement as a business strategy to yield better results. The builders partner with a business or organization to improve workplaces by focusing on strengths and development for more engaged employees. The hands-on training enables students to better understand how to develop talent, motivate and engage their employees in their future careers.

From this training, students learned to approach engagement as a business strategy, which yields better results. They also learned to harness Gallup’s Q12 employee engagement survey as a tool.

Students then provide consulting to local workplaces to help them assess and increase their work team engagement. Students have helped created change and improvement for several workplaces in Lincoln including Goldenrod Pastries, Lincoln Children’s Zoo, Nelnet, Speedway Motors, Spreetail, Bulu Group, QuantifiedAg and more.

The student teams met first with the manager of the workplace team to discuss goals and offer them a one-on-one strengths coaching session. Then, they administered Gallup’s Q12 employee engagement assessment to all on the workplace team. With the results, the student team led a collaborative action planning session at the business to gather input and build workers’ investment in creating a plan to become more engaged in their workplace.

Jordan De Spong, member of the 2017 cohort from Dunedin, New Zealand, worked with Speedway Motors. He believes the Q12 survey provides a unique opportunity for employees to take action based on the results.

“It was fascinating to see their employees take action and commit to raising the standard of their own engagement. Unlike traditional employee surveys, which are mostly used for assessment purposes only, this method allows employees to own what happens next,” he said.

He felt like the process benefited both students and the company. Not only did students see how employee engagement impacts the big picture, but they helped create an action plan that would motivate employees to increase engagement.

“We’re thankful they gave us a chance as consultants to go to the front line and help make an impact. I believe companies that implement this in their various teams throughout the organization will see significant impact and improvement in their performance,” he said.

Beyond sharpening their engagement expertise and leadership skills, the consulting process also allowed students to take an in-depth look into teams, businesses and nonprofit organizations. Builders present their results and key takeaways they can apply to their future goals as builders of teams, businesses and communities to Gallup employees each fall.

“I will take what I learned in this experience with me and use it in the future. I hope to one day open a nonprofit that helps children with legal issues. Working with the Lincoln Children's Zoo taught me that a nonprofit can still be run similarly to a for-profit organization and for it to be an effective and successful organization, it requires a strong team,” said Elaina Bailey, member of the 2017 cohort from Kansas City, Missouri.
Global Opportunities, Business Experiences Shape Husker’s Future

As an international business student at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln, Quincey Bernard spent his time jetting across the world for study-abroad trips and honing his entrepreneurship skills. He did it all for one reason — to one day return to his hometown of Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and give back to the country he loves by revitalizing and transforming Haiti’s economy.

“I want to do things for people back home. That’s the long-term plan,” Bernard said.

Bernard was inspired to study entrepreneurship by his parents. From humble beginnings, they went on to found their own successful company in Haiti 18 years ago.

“My mom is one of my role models, because no one helped her,” Bernard said. “You don’t start a company when you’re the lowest of the lowest class, which my parents were. So whenever she says something, I just take it in and listen.”

In addition to his work as an international business major, Bernard flourished as a Clifton Builder by honing his entrepreneurial skills.

Moving 2,000 miles away from home can be a big transition for any student, but Bernard wasn’t intimidated. He dove into his studies and was soon named an Allan Noddle International Business Distinguished Scholar. The honor allowed him to study abroad in Panama and help a company create a plan to export teakwood to the United States.

Bernard believes in the potential of his country and wants to share that message with the world, using the networking and entrepreneurship skills he learned while attending the College of Business.

“By 30, I would like to be the ambassador or a diplomat for Haiti,” Bernard said. “We have much more to offer. We’re a very wealthy country, with natural resources, gas and petroleum, and we’re a small country of 10 million people. We also have a unique indigenous background like no other country,” Bernard said. “I want to help my country move forward.”
Ridenour Invites Others to Reach Their Potential

For Brianna Ridenour, ’18, knowing she had potential did not necessarily equate to fulfilling her goals. She learned saying “yes” to invitations offered through the Clifton Strengths Institute (CSI) unleashed her innate abilities.

“Lack of access and guidance often prohibits people from harnessing their talents and leaves an incredible amount of potential untapped,” said Ridenour, who majored in management at the College of Business. “I was fortunate enough to have great mentors who helped me recognize my strengths. I’m forever grateful for my invite from Mark Pogue to CliftonStrengths.”

Pogue, who died of cancer the summer following Ridenour’s graduation, led the CSI at Nebraska Business when it started and made it possible for all business students to learn about their strengths. Ridenour became a strengths coach and helped more than 100 students to better understand their abilities.

“Watching Mark make his own rules gave me confidence to make positive change. Together, they challenged my thinking and granted me autonomy in my work,” said Ridenour, a first-generation college student.

Ridenour went on to participate as a Clifton Builder and a strengths-based program development intern. Those opportunities proved fruitful after graduation when she spent two terms of service as an AmeriCorps member with College Possible in Omaha, Nebraska.

“I supported more than 40 high school students from low-income backgrounds as they navigated the college process. I gained knowledge regarding the access side of higher education, especially ways of overcoming barriers so many students fall victim to without proper support,” she said.

Ridenour continues to invite students to new opportunities just as she was by the CSI.
Clifton Strengths Institute coaches and builders joined forces to form the Clifton Strengths Organization (CSO), a recognized student organization. By creating dedicated time for members to come together and relate as students, the CSO enhanced their community by providing greater support and stronger connections.

“The CSO provides a place where we can breathe from the stresses of school, create memories with close friends and learn outside the walls of the CSI and the college,” said Keaton Fricker, who is both a builder and a coach, and serves as president.

Vice President Collin Fink, a senior advertising and public relations major with minor in business from Hebron, Nebraska, agreed stating, “The CSO has given the institute even more depth. Through this organization, we have the chance to hang out and get to know each other on a whole other level.”

The organization also hosts events to bring both new and experienced coaches and builder together to promote the spirit of entrepreneurship and strengths-based sciences. They also schedule one-on-one check-ins to allow builders and coaches to learn more about each other.

“My favorite memory of the CSO has been creating the 2020 Cohort Builder Welcome event. This event invited the new Builder cohort to meet the other cohorts. We played games and ended with Raising Canes,” said Fricker, a senior marketing major with a minor in management from Midland, Texas.

Besides building stronger connections, serving in a CSO leadership role helps students further hone their skills. Fricker explained how she now has the courage to speak for the CSO members as president.

“CSI helped me grow into a leader who is organized, open-minded and hopeful,” she said.
High School Students Build T-Shirt Business With Great Success

Twenty-two teen entrepreneurs participated in Nebraska’s Future Builders Challenge completed an intensive, month-long internship with the University of Nebraska–Lincoln Clifton Strengths Institute to gain the skills fundamental to becoming their own future business owners and industry leaders. They launched their Lincoln Builders T-shirt business, and after one week of sales, they sold nearly $8,150 in shirts.

The internship included a four-part program through which the cadre of 22 students were selected from more than 3,200 local students assessed through Gallup’s Builder Profile 10, which identifies people’s dominant talents showing aptitude to become an entrepreneur, innovator and builder. Students first considered T-shirt designs to address what the community should do to ensure youth are successful, maintain economic growth and keep a strong and and a vibrant community as outlined by Prosper Lincoln. Their four T-shirt designs explored themes of positivity, equality, the environment and “power the future.”

After solidifying their designs, the students’ attention turned to marketing and sales. Popup sales at The Foundry, formerly known as the Nonprofit Hub, and Jazz in June were complemented by online sales. Success came quickly.

“Within less than 48 hours of having our shirts, we sold 150 of them. Then we sold $5,000 in shirts in four business days and repaid our loan,” said Sam Hurt, a sophomore at Lincoln Southwest High School.

The students officially launched their business at an event hosted at the College of Business, which included a runway show of their T-shirt designs. The students delivered a powerful presentation explaining the meaning behind the equality shirt. Derek Branch, future builder from Lincoln Southeast High School and five students shared values they aspire Lincolnites to embrace.

“The next time you witness or experience a moment of inequality, we want to challenge you to have the courage to say, ‘I value you,’ ‘I embrace you,’ ‘I celebrate you,’ and ‘I love you.’ This is the Lincoln we want to build,” Branch said.

With support from corporate sponsors to mentorship leaders from the university, Gallup, and the local business community, the students completed the program after developing their strengths, entrepreneurial skills and leadership potential.
Mark Pogue, founding executive director of the Clifton Strengths Institute and assistant professor of practice in management, dedicated his life to creating and delivering development programs for students. During his 15 years as a senior learning and development consultant at Gallup, he founded Gallup's Higher Education Division, bringing his expertise in strengths to engage executive leadership in higher education. His charismatic personality was a natural fit to launch the Clifton Strengths Institute at Nebraska Business.

Whether speaking to freshmen students about how to utilize strengths to find happiness and fulfillment, or speaking to employers about becoming aware of how to improve productivity and create a better quality of life for everyone, Pogue sought to plant seeds of growth in his interactions. He believed in the strengths-sciences engineered by former Nebraska professor, Dr. Don Clifton, and emphasized it to everyone at the college.

“I can't think of a better way to help our students be successful and reach their potential than by starting their college career with a program that helps them identify their natural talents and strengths, and then provides them with individualized coaching to apply those strengths towards their goals,” Pogue said when introducing the first class of student strengths coaches in 2016.

Students across campus reacted to Pogue’s message by upwards of 80 students serving as strengths coaches each year. Students also responded by applying to the groundbreaking Clifton Builders Program designed to identify high-potential student entrepreneurs to provide leadership and change the world through community building and innovative new business ventures.

Both of his daughters, Paige ('19) and Reilly ('20), were active in Mark's efforts, even joining the group of student strengths coaches. Paige also was in the first cohort of the Clifton Builders Program. Both of Mark's daughters continue to shape their careers and passions for leading others. “I really do feel like I’m carrying on my dad's legacy in almost all aspects of my life right now, which is really meaningful to me,” Reilly said.

At the dedication of Howard L. Hawks in the fall of 2017, Jim Clifton, chairman and CEO of Gallup, singled out Pogue for his work with the Clifton Strengths Institute. Clifton said beyond the $30 million gift his family helped provide to establish the institute, “the bigger gift was Mark Pogue. The hardest job was teaching the strengths classes. Mark had to bring the magic to make this work and he did.”

Cancer took Pogue’s life on September 5, 2018 at the age of 57. He spearheaded the integration of strengths-based sciences at the university in the College of Business, providing a guiding vision devoted to maximizing talent in every business student.

Pogue Dedicated Life to Maximizing Students’ Strengths
Four Students Receive Inaugural Clifton Strengths Institute Awards

Mark Pogue committed his life to help others through strengths. The inaugural Clifton Strengths Institute (CSI) Recognition Ceremony participants honored Pogue, founding executive director of the CSI who died of cancer in 2018, by presenting the first-ever Mark Pogue Award. The institute also recognized Outstanding Builder and Outstanding Coach recipients during the virtual event in April.

Elaina Bailey, a senior management major from Kansas City, received the Mark Pogue Award presented by Mark’s wife, Jami, and daughters, Paige and Reilly. The family emphasized the special meaning of the award due to Bailey’s student relationship with Mark.

“It’s special because you actually knew my dad,” Paige told Bailey at the ceremony. “In the years to come, people won’t know him in that way so this is extra special because of your personal relationship.”

Bailey explained how Mark’s impact lives on through her relationships with others.

“Each day I wake up wanting to carry on his legacy,” said Bailey, who is also in Nebraska Business Honors Academy. “Mark created a family of great leaders. The thing I appreciate most was his honesty. Mark believed in sharing problems upfront and finding a way to overcome them together. Every time I consult, I try to be more like Mark. I strive to be fearless,” said Bailey, who also received one of two Outstanding Builder Awards.

The Outstanding Builder Award honors students in the Clifton Builders program with innate entrepreneurial talents, who tackle challenges to create change where others might back away. The two recipients included Bailey and Sierra Hassel, a senior accounting major from Johnston, Iowa.

Nominees lauded Hassel for an infectious humility and passion that made them want to be on her team, and her drive to create meaningful change. The former Husker gymnast, also used her Builder strengths serving as vice president of the student-athlete advisory committee.

The two winners of the Outstanding Coaches Award included Audrey Erker, a junior business administration major from Omaha, Nebraska, and Alyson Lenz, a senior marketing and management major from Council Bluffs, Iowa.

Strengths coaches serve as mentors to freshmen students in BSAD 111 to help them learn how to use their talents most effectively in school and beyond. Honorees received their award because of the ability to coach strengths with a developmental mindset aimed to assist others in leveraging their talents. Winners exceeded expectations in their work to advance strengths.

Erker helped build a strengths program for Nelnet by coaching more than 70 employees. She held a strengths workshop for her Gamma Phi Beta sorority and served as Clifton Strengths Organization vice president.

Lenz received the award for contributing to the strengths culture at Nebraska by sharing strengths daily and holding workshops at her Tri Delta sorority. One nominee praised Lenz for inspiring her to give back and become a strengths coach.

“The strengths program has been the highlight of my college experience,” said Lenz. “Every time I go into the CSI office it makes me happy to see everyone. I love helping students through coaching.”
Points of Pride

3,000+ students received 1-on-1 coaching on their top 5 CliftonStrengths

230+ trained student Strengths coaches

6,000+ hours of 1-on-1 coaching on students’ top 5 CliftonStrengths

40+ faculty and staff trained as Gallup-certified Strengths coaches in the College of Business

92% of students felt Strengths coaches made them confident about their college experience and future career success

18 organizations have received engagement consulting from Builders

92 builders from around the world currently in program

110+ ideas pitched in pitch business competitions
Developing Career Engagement

According to the Gallup Alumni Survey, students’ odds of being engaged at work in the future are:

- **2.6x higher** if college prepared them well for life outside of college
- **1.8x higher** if they were extremely active in extracurricular activities and organizations while attending college
- **2.4x higher** if their college was passionate about the long-term successes of its students
- **1.8x higher** if they worked on a project that took a semester or more to complete
- **2x higher** if they had an internship or job that allowed them to apply what they were learning in the classroom
- **2.2x higher** if they had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their goals and dreams

* 2014 report https://go.unl.edu/2014GPIReport

Focusing on Strengths

According to Gallup research, teams and people who focus on their strengths are:

- **12% more** productive
- **3x as likely** to report having an excellent quality of life
- **6x as likely** to be engaged in their jobs