

Playing to Your Strengths
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MCAD MASD
Creative Leadership
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5 INDIVIDUALS CHOSEN FOR FEEDBACK

1. Cate Hendren

We become friends in the sixth grade and bonded instantly. Throughout middle school, any time it was possible to do an assignment together, we partnered up. We went to different high schools and colleges but remained friends over the years. A year or so after graduating college, we were able to live in the same town again. Neither of us had really made new friends there, so having each other helped make living there better. She's the one friend who I can count on for good advice, because we're pretty similar, so we understand each other. We both struggled with finding our way after college and have helped each other out.

2. Alex Dull

Alex is my boyfriend. We met four years ago when he was a senior in college and I had already graduated. Since we got together at a pivotal time in our lives, we've seen each other through a lot of ups and downs. I'm always honest with him, even if it's not always positive. He's an illustrator, and I've helped him make better work by telling him he can do better and he should hold himself to a high standard. Before, he would be satisfied with mediocre work, because it looked good enough. But over the years he's grown from having someone who doesn't just compliment his work but is able to help him improve. He always says that his art has gotten so much better because of my input and encouragement.

3. Donna Hunt

This is my mom. We're very close, and I've always looked up to her. I moved back in with my parents for about a year and left last summer. It was a nice way to re-strengthen our relationship after I had been living far away for a few years. She's always encouraged me to push myself to reach my full potential and use my creativity and other gifts, even if I'm not following a conventional path. I know I've had a positive influence on her and my dad as well- I became a vegetarian when I was 15, and they followed suit a few years alter. They've always cared about the environment but have become more conscious of their choices in recent years. My mom is one of the hardest working people I know, and always makes time to help other people, remembers everyone's birthdays, participates in school activities (she's a teacher), and almost never complains.

4. Kristin Aloï

Kristin is another friend I made in sixth grade. We're pretty different- she was our valedictorian, good at math and science, went to college on a gymnastics scholarship, and now she's a pharmacist and living in Tampa with her pharmacist husband. We've definitely taken different paths but have always kept in touch. Throughout college and few years after, we would write each other letters on a regular basis. We visited each other at college a few times and see each other whenever we're both back in our hometown. Each time, it's like no time has passed and we're right back where we left off. I think our differences have enriched our friendship- I've introduced her to more artsy things and encouraged her to nurture her creative side, and she's inspired me to be a more dedicated student and push myself to be healthier and exercise more.

5. Luciano Flor

We met in college but didn't become close friends until the summer after I graduated. I lived with him and his brother for a while, and they were the best roommates I've ever had. He's definitely one of a kind. We've worked together on art projects and experienced a lot together, and are now both living in Brooklyn.

COMMON THEMES UNCOVERED: creativity, willingness to help people, compassion, taking risks/being bold, resilience/persistence, problem-solving

I haven't really thought of my choices as taking risks, but looking back, I guess I have made decisions that others might have been afraid of. It's not the most radical- I haven't moved to another country or quit a job without having a plan in place, but the choices I've made have been different from any of my friends or family members.

I've always loved art and doing anything creative, so I'm not surprised that came up so often. I can't imagine a life without art or taking a career that doesn't require some degree of artistry or design. Something interesting is that the responses I got from people who aren't artists didn't focus as much on my creativity as the responses from non-artists. The more artistic people I questioned- Alex and Luciano- wrote about my problem-solving and organizational skills. I think this may be because we notice in others what we lack ourselves.

I was surprised to read the parts about me being persistent, hard working, or resilient. I've always felt that I take the easy way out and would rather do nothing than something. I think that's because my parents are such hard workers, and so are/were their parents that my life seems easy and my struggles seem more trivial. Society tends to consider people who seek creative careers to be privileged or not doing "real work," so I guess that's a message I unconsciously absorbed. When I compare myself to my mom's mother, who grew up on a farm

picking cotton and tobacco, then, when she was married, worked in a textile mill all day and stayed up past midnight canning food she grew, then continued to work at a peach stand until she was 90, I feel like my life is incredibly easy. Then I remember the time when I worked three jobs, or how I slept on friends' couches for a while as I worked to save up enough to pay rent, and even recently as I've balanced school and starting life in a new city with a job where I'm on my feet all day or night dealing with angry customers, and I can see how that might be considered resilient. My search to find a path that interested me also took some persistence. I couldn't settle to continue going from job to job, sometimes being in a decent position and other times having terrible hours and low pay. I knew that I could do better, so I took the leap to go back to school, even if it means I'll have a lot of student loan debt.

I like solving problems, especially when they aren't my own personal problems. I enjoy puzzles and fixing things and untying knots. I like the feeling of having solved a problem that no one else could, or finding a solution that no one else could think of. It can be stressful, but being able to clearly see the progress I've made is worth the stress.

SELF PORTRAIT

When I'm at my best, I'm passionate, excited about life, productive, open to new ideas, sociable, and thoughtful. At my worst, I'm depressed, tired, reclusive, rigid in my opinions, judgmental, and self-absorbed. When I start to feel those ways, I try to catch myself and figure out why I'm feeling that way before it gets too far. My best self is engaged with the world and curious, seeking out new projects and actively learning. I do my best work when I care about what I'm doing and see its purpose in the greater system. Even if I don't enjoy something, I can push through if I know it's for a good reason. As I've gotten older, I've gotten better about pushing through the things I don't want to do. When I was younger, I often fell short of my potential because I wasn't willing to put effort into things that I wasn't interested in. It's still a trait that I struggle with. On one hand, it's a helpful instinct because I can easily tell what I do and don't care about, but we all have to do things we aren't interested in sometimes.

I've found that I'm always more motivated when my actions are helping someone else. I'm able to pour hours into helping my boyfriend with his artwork or schedule, but have difficulty doing the same thing for myself. When I've felt stuck and uninspired, I've found that making something for a friend has helped me finish projects. My friend Cate brought up a purse that I made her a few years ago. I made that purse during a time of feeling unproductive, lost, and unmotivated. Once I decided that I'd make something for her, instead of making art for myself or art for art's sake, it was easy to follow through. I also try harder to make something well when it's not for me- I'd rather disappoint myself than someone else, because I can keep fixing whatever I've made or just let it go and move on to the next thing. While the desire to help others is a strength, lacking the desire to help myself is a weakness.

When I'm at my best, I'm at my most creative and most able to follow through with creative instincts. Instead of just writing down ideas or sketches, I am fueled to actually do something and find people to share my ideas with. I am willing to get out and explore and find adventures, like my friend Kristin wrote about. At my best, I can come up with fun things to do and can get other people excited about them. In that way, I am self-reliant and don't need others to tell me what to do, I take charge and lead the way.

PLAN TO REDESIGN APPROACH TO WORK, GRAD STUDIES, CAREER ASPIRATIONS, ETC

This activity has boosted my confidence. It's helpful to take the time to reflect on your own accomplishments and struggles, but it can be even more helpful to hear what others come up with when they reflect on those same accomplishments and struggles. The outside perspective is good to have because I tend to downplay my own accomplishments in my head and focus instead on aspects of myself to improve. I know that our parents tend to be the most likely to give us praise, but my mom's response really inspired me. I didn't realize how many little things she had noticed and appreciated over the years, and as someone whose opinion I really respect, it meant a lot to me.

In the future, I aim to be more proactive and surefooted instead of doubting myself or not following through on goals. The examples people gave that impacted them personally were things I did without much thought; they just came naturally to me. My instincts tend to be right, so I should follow through more often instead of getting caught up in self-doubt, laziness, and shyness. In line with the talks we watched this week, I should lean into my uniqueness instead of trying to follow what others are doing.

I don't have a specific approach to my career aspirations. It's only now hitting me that I'll probably be finishing school next spring and should be working on a plan and figuring out what career I want. Of course I want to do something involving sustainable design, but I don't know what specific area I want to go into. This activity has strengthened my desire to have a career that utilizes my creativity and problem-solving capabilities and allows me to continually grow and learn new things. I've always known I want to help people, and the responses I received showed me that's possible.

My thesis is based around improving sustainability in textile manufacturing in a way that puts workers at the center, finding out what problems they face and searching for ways to improve their workplace and its impact on the environment and the community. When writing my self-portrait, I realized that the best way to motivate myself is to work on something that's for someone else. My thesis and my motivation for studying sustainable design are signs of this;

when I graduated college I realized I didn't feel any passion for the careers I was qualified for because they weren't directly contributing to improving the world. The feedback I received reinforced my desire to find a career that has a positive impact on people.

I need to be more open and accept help as much as I'm willing to give it. I find it hard to ask for help because I don't want to be a burden, or sometimes because I think I can do something on my own better than I could with someone else. We've learned so much in this class about how collaboration is important, but I know that it's something I struggle with. Although my friend Kristin said I'm good at bringing people together, that only applies to social settings or fun activities, not so much projects or work.

All in all, this activity has inspired me to be more bold, follow my instincts to help others, embrace and utilize my creativity, not worry about following the path the others have taken, make more of an effort to reach out to other people, and be more open to new possibilities, ideas, and opportunities.

APPENDIX OF RESPONSES

CATE:

Here goes. You have many, many strengths. A few are creativity, introspection, and persistence. Some of the times I've benefited from your creativity are silly (ex: our 6th grade miles-long magna carta addressed to Santa Claus, seventh grade Venus and Serena backdrop where we created a tennis court on the poster board using netting AND a golf ball, and our 8th weather report that was both pink and scented). Another, more serious, example of your creativity is your art. Obviously art is creative, but I think yours is particularly creative in that it often starts with giving old things a new life. The way you re-use items and re-form them takes imagination and artistry -- seen in the tent of recycled bags you made at SCAD or the amazing bag you made me which was dyed with onion skins (I think?) and an old wonder woman print. Both of these are examples in which you brought beauty in the world and made use of something that was nearly scrapped!! You are also introspective and persistent -- I think about all the vocational pondering we've both done as our twenties have zoomed by. You've worked really hard to figure out what you care about and what you want to do in the world (and where). From selling trinkets in Savannah, to hauling corpses (too dark?? feel free to delete that example if it's too much) and selling clothes in Asheville, to screen printing and sewing undies (again you can delete undies if you don't want 'unmentionables' mentioned in class) in Winston, to museum guiding in NYC. While balancing school -- and going back to school or sustainable design itself was the result of a lot of consideration and effort! You've made it work in all those places and all those times you've kept asking yourself what was the next right step for you. It's inspiring to me as I've sorted through my own next steps, and I think it has been to other people in your life, too (remember when Alex wanted to start grad school or now wants to find a new job).

That's just a lil bit on your fine qualities, but hopefully will do the trick for class. Hope it's ok that this is so specific to our growing up and may not make sense to a larger audience.

ALEX:

Audrey is a very smart and sharp individual. Quite a few of her strengths are some of my biggest weaknesses, and this has been very helpful to me. She is very organized, which I am not, and has helped me numerous times organize my work spaces in sensible ways. She is also very resilient and hardworking, and has pushed me through hard stretches of work I would've struggled with much more without her. She is good at prioritizing and planning, and has helped me strategize my business to maximize it's potential. I am a hard worker but not very organized, and I get distracted easily. She's taught me over the years ways to keep my things and myself together, and it has helped me push my art and myself forward and grow as a person, in ways I would've really struggled without her.

MOM:

One of the first things that comes to mind is Audrey's passion to educate people about simple ways to improve or sustain the environment. She created a booklet on composting to distribute at a local elementary school (that she attended as a child). The booklet was available in print and braille because there are several blind students at the school. She then talked to the science teacher about building a compost bin for the school. She purchased the equipment, designed and built a compost bin. Her efforts to educate started a committee of school staff talking about other ways to produce less waste or recycle more. We also save packaged, unopened food or whole fruit to send home with less fortunate students or those who do not have a daily snack. A small effort on Audrey's part has started the ball rolling to improve our school and educate children. When she sees a need, she thinks of a way to solve it or improve what is being done. She goes about her plan in a non-offensive way, showing others how her ideas can have a long-term effect.

On a more personal level, I have witnessed Audrey's love and care for her Grandmother, my mother. One of Audrey's strengths is her quiet compassion. Her Grandmother is 91 and quite different from Audrey. Yet Audrey has made her Grandmother her pen pal! Audrey has taken her places I'm sure she doesn't want to go and never once complained. She always takes the time to spend an afternoon with her. Just a simple act of kindness from Audrey makes her Grandmother's day.

Finally, other demonstrations of Audrey's patience and compassion are the many times she has visited me at school. I teach children who are blind. Audrey has read to them, played with them and even brought her violin to school to help them play. Her talents and strengths go beyond what she creates (and she is VERY creative).

Another strength is her frugality. While she is from a generation who wants the latest and greatest, Audrey has chosen a much simpler way to live. She is not wasteful with spending. She has learned to live with less, find free activities to entertain herself, and has a real respect for the outdoors and being outside. She is a good example for me!

Audrey is willing to take risks. She had qualified for the highly academically gifted program in elementary school but decided to stay at a school where the program was not offered. She was a very shy child, but made a brave decision to attend a middle school where she knew one other student. Middle school can be very trying and most children want to go to the same school as their friends. As a result of choosing a different school, she had experiences she never would have had and made life-long friends, friends with similar interests. She took another leap of faith when she chose a college five hours from her hometown where she had only one acquaintance. Again, this paid off in that she found her passion in weaving and using natural dyes and made more friends with the same skills or interests. When she moved to Asheville, NC, she took a job that most females her age would never consider. She started working for a funeral home. Her compassion for others was demonstrated time and again as she removed deceased bodies

from homes or hospitals and offered comfort to their loved ones. This was not a glamorous job, but one that she learned from and probably learned some things about herself too. Finally, she moved far away from North Carolina, her home state, to pursue her dream of living in a big city, New York City. She continues to amaze me with her willingness to take risks.

So these are a few of Audrey's strengths: her passion for the environment and ability to teach others ways to save or improve the world around them; her love of her grandmother; her compassion for others; and her willingness to take risks.

KRISTIN:

There are many prominent strengths that come to mind with I think about Audrey. The first one is creativity with imaginative ideas. Knowing Audrey since middle school, I remember many examples of her creativity from creating birthday signs and collages for others that were always the talk of the town to taking group projects to the next level. These ideas stretched further than just artwork. Audrey always had an innovative activity in mind for weekends in our small hometown. My personal favorite was climbing to the roof of a deserted historical building to discover the history inside as well as get the best views of the town. Her ideas always made the most of what we had at the time and things were never boring with her. It was for this reason as well that Audrey had a diverse friend group which leads me to another one of her strengths; she's open, tolerant of others, and inclusive. She brought together so many different-minded teenagers and made our high school experience harmonious. Her sixteenth birthday party was the perfect representation of this, bringing together people of many contrasting personalities and just having the time of our lives. Whenever I go back to my hometown over holidays, it is always Audrey again that brings together these friends and unites them. She continues to build an inclusive community wherever she goes. She's been meaningful to my life for all the above reasons and so much more.

LUCIANO:

Audrey can problem solve efficiently. When we used to have a garden together she knew about the vegetables and how to position them and when we didn't know she'd just look it up. She'd find stuff from around the garden to prop up plants.

I like Audrey's sense of humor because she is willing to engage in ridiculous/nonsensical speech which for me is a sign of creativity. Having someone who I can talk nonsense to but is at the same time a coherent person to talk serious things with is something I appreciate.

Common Theme	Examples Given	Possible Interpretation
Creativity	Art, sense of humor, choice of activities,	Creativity goes beyond art and design and can enrich any area of my life
Persistence	Life choices, way of handling jobs/obstacles, problem solving	I can push through hard times if I know it's worthwhile and there's an end in sight, and I learn along the way
Open-Mindedness	Approach to teaching others, friendships, sense of humor	I gain strength from maintaining an open mind, rather than seeing things from only my perspective or black and white
Care for others	Helping at school, spending time with grandmother, helping with others' personal work/struggles	The desire to help people is so ingrained that it happens naturally and is a driving force to keep me motivated and focused on goals