We’ve all been stuck at a party near “that guy” who likes to drone on about his job, his awesome house or car, how accomplished his kids are, etc. ad nauseam. Most of us will do anything to avoid spending time near anyone like that. Survey a roomful of people and you’ll never get more than a tiny minority who will claim that they enjoy talking about themselves. Culturally, we find talking about ourselves distasteful, and yet it is a highly important skill required at some very key points in our lives. Those who do it poorly are wholly forgettable, and those who do it well are memorable to the admissions office, future employers, and first dates.

Most schools or employers want to know who people are as individuals, what inspires them, excites them, and helps them to work well with others. They are less enthused to hear the number of leadership positions one has held, how many service hours have been compiled, or how many seasons one played a sport. Too often when our students are asked to talk about themselves, they fall into the trap of reading off their resume. If you have worked in the world of admissions or have ever asked students to write a paper about themselves, you see this with regularity. The rare student who is thoughtful about who they are as a learner, leader, or person is the one who stands out in this world. The student who knows themselves well and can talk at length about his strengths and weaknesses draws others to himself.

This reality was crystallized for us a few years ago when we conducted a year-end review of our student life activities and our student body president shared that the toughest interview question she ever faced was, “Tell me about yourself.” Our student body president was, like many independent school student leaders, highly impressive. She had a deep and rich experience in our upper school, including trips to China and India, the founding of a robust Relay for Life club after the early death of her father due to cancer, and an academic career that put her at the top of her class. This was the type of student who had done a great deal, and experienced a consequential life thus far. If it was a challenge for her to talk about herself, we surmise it is a daunting task for the majority of our students.

Dialoguing about oneself requires pausing and diving deep into who you are. Our students are often so task-focused that they rarely allow the time for the self-reflection essential to understanding self. In 2008, we decided to explore Strengthsfinder 2.0 by Tom Rath as our summer reading assignment. We asked our students to take the Strengthsfinder assessment, which required answering 180 questions about themselves over a 45-60 minute period. Their answers to this battery of questions generated a list of five top strengths out of a possible 34; for example, students might be Futuristic, Achiever, Developer, or Context. Students then read about the qualities of those strengths and interviewed their friends and family to see if the report aligned with the experience of those closest to them.

While our original intention was to help our students better understand themselves as learners, we realized the power of this simple test to help students tell their story in a unique way. The experience was so powerful that we quickly decided this was not going to be a one-off summer read in 2008, but something that we would make a distinct and valuable part of our culture. Moving forward, all of our new students, teachers, and every freshman would take the Strengthsfinder assessment as part of their Cannon School experience.

At that time, one of our English teachers was using another tool called the True Colors personality test to help divide her students into cooperative groups. Designed by Don Lowry, this inventory segregates students into four primary groups...
or temperaments with overlapping characteristics and an assigned color. Greens are data-driven and highly rational. Golds are known for their love of systems and organization. Orange is the color of those who live spontaneously and look for fun. Blue is the color of folks high in empathy and a need to get along with others. As with Strengthsfinder, we discovered the power of self-knowledge and committed to training a few of our teachers to become certified True Colors facilitators who would provide testing for all of our students and teachers every year. Since those days, we have added a larger battery of tests, including Do What You Are, Myers-Briggs, and a Learning Styles inventory.

As with any ambitious program, we soon discovered that many of our students, while they had a rich series of opportunities for self-awareness as well as a host of data points, they still had trouble connecting the dots. Fortunately for us, our college counseling team, who oversaw some of our self-assessment testing, had an interest in collaborating with our work on self-knowledge as a means of helping our seniors tell their story.

The “Telling Your Story” experience began with our students creating a comprehensive document that assembled the results of all of their personality tests over their time in our upper school. They were given time to reflect and asked to generate a 140-character tweet summarizing who they were, followed by a one-page reflection that expanded on that tweet. The culminating piece was a rehearsed and performed 3-minute monologue that told their story. Frankly, this experience required a lot of ungraded work at a time when our students thought there were better ways to spend their time, in spite of our regular explanations of the value of this exercise. However, once our seniors were finished and able to reflect on their progress, they let us know that it was a highly valuable activity and that we should have started it sooner with more frequent touch points.

The Cannon School class of 2018 will enter their senior year having assembled all of their relevant self-awareness data, reflection, and tweet. They had time over their summer break to assemble a thoughtful story of self and in the early fall we will ask them to share their story, record it, and post it on the college social media platform, ZeeMee.

Sharing your story with others is invaluable. It is a gift that gives to both the sharer and recipient. A great deal of insight is learned and it can be the difference between a superficial meeting and one that is rich and meaningful. It is essential that we foster an environment that encourages the story of our students. It is crucial that we allow time for our students to learn about themselves and to reflect on what it means for their life as a learner and individual. We have learned over the years that we have to be highly intentional about helping our students recognize the challenge of this project and provide them opportunities and information essential to ensure their success.