

## **The Impact of Positive Psychology on Higher Education**

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The field of higher education has adopted positive psychology through an emphasis on strengths-based education that allows the individual student to excel through an emphasis on personal strengths. This literature review will examine the dynamics of higher education and the impact of shifting environmental factors on student development. Positive psychology will then be considered as an approach for improving the well-being and success of college students. The ontology, epistemology, methodology, and axiology of the paradigm of positive psychology will be explained and evaluated. This analysis will conclude with an overview of the benefits to adopting a positive psychology approach on students and institutions of higher education.

### **Higher Education Environment**

As early as Benjamin Franklin in the 1700s and John Dewey in the late 1800s, educators have sought to focus on students' strengths (Lopez, 2006). In the early 1900s, Alfred Binet, a French psychologist, started to use a model that examined a student's talents and strengths rather than the disease model that focused on an individual's problems (Binet & Simon, 1916). During the 1960s, Arthur Chickering stressed the need for educators to focus more on students' abilities rather than their deficits (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Today, a strengths-based education involves the measurement of a student's achievement and strengths as well as the determinants of positive outcomes (Lopez, 2006).

Around the same time that educators were shifting towards a strengths-based approach to student development, higher education institutions began shifting their structure as well. Prior to World War II in the late 1930s, higher education had religious undertones, emphasized moral

character development, and was seen as conceivable only for the elite (Bok, 2006). After World War II ended in 1945, college enrollment increased due to the G.I. Bill that provided educational funds for veterans (Schreiner, 2015). With the growing diversity of the student population, institutions expanded and faculty narrowed their scope (Schreiner, 2015). In doing so, higher education institutions started to teach skills that would help students to fill specific job duties after graduation, which was a dramatic shift from the previous educational philosophy of encouraging character development (Arum & Roska, 2011).

As a result of this shift in higher education, student-centeredness came to the forefront and co-curricular programming became more widely available to students (Schreiner, 2015). Institutions began to offer new educational courses and programming in an effort to appear attractive and enroll an increasing number of students (Gardner, 2005; Thelin, 2004). Private higher educational institutions were able to offer accelerated programs or smaller class sizes that were more attractive than larger public institutions (Thelin, 2004). For this reason, private institutions were able to be more selective about their admissions processes, and therefore, would garner a better reputation as a prestigious institution (Thelin, 2004). In an effort to emulate the success of private institutions of higher education, public institutions sought to develop similar offerings, which resulted in intense industry competition (Thelin, 2004). Unfortunately, this dynamic competitive environment in higher education meant that many institutions transitioned from being student-centered to profit-driven, and education began to be perceived as more of a commodity (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Schreiner, 2015; Thelin, 2004).

Today, colleges and universities tend to be more concerned with national rankings and

reputations rather than student development and success (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Thelin, 2004). This emphasis on national rankings leads to investments in new buildings instead of new programs designed to heighten a student's personal development (Arum & Roksa, 2011). However, there are a growing number of researchers, such as Schreiner (2015) and Thelin (2004), who are recommending a return to strengths-based education and student development objectives. Expanding current educational programs is not enough and diversity within higher education institutions needs to be explored (Thelin, 2004). Returning to the fundamental educational tenets of helping students to see their positive aspects and strengths could change the way higher education impacts the greater society. Through higher education, individuals can lead richer lives and be prepared for "civic engagement and productive work" (Schreiner, 2015, p. 4). The practice of positive psychology as a tool for enhancing student development in higher education will now be examined further.

### **Practice of Positive Psychology**

Martin Seligman, the father of the modern positive psychology movement, introduced positive psychology to the American Psychological Association when he was selected president in 1998 (Froh, 2004). However, the term actually originated with Abraham Maslow in his 1954 seminal book, *Motivation and Personality* (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Seligman, building on Maslow's research, believed that clinical psychology had become consumed by the topic of mental illness and an emphasis on drug treatment (Froh, 2004). He urged psychologists to take the opposite approach and focus on the scientific study of well-being, optimism, and flourishing (Simmons, 2013). Instead of centering on problem-focused psychology, positive psychologists concentrate on individuals and organizations building gratitude and developing strengths to help create a good life (Peterson, 2013).

Positive psychology emphasizes 'thriving' as a key element in success (Schreiner, 2015). Thriving in higher education is defined as, "fully engaged intellectually, socially, and emotionally in the college experience" (Schreiner, 2010, p. 4). Successfully thriving recognizes the importance of academics as well as the development of time management, optimism, appreciation of differences in others, and community involvement (Schreiner, 2010). Research suggests that these characteristics can be taught and linked to academic success (Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson, & McIntosh, 2009). Thriving permits individuals to fulfill their potential, as every individual's potential is unique to their own abilities (Marks & Wade, 2015).

### **Positive Psychology Applied to Higher Education**

Positive psychologists concerned with education concentrate on strengths-based initiatives and increasing intrinsic motivation in both secondary and post-secondary schools (Louis & Schreiner, 2012). Strengths-based education targets more than grades and graduation rates. It empowers individuals to develop fulfilling and productive lives by focusing on student success (Schreiner, 2015). Positive psychologists see educational programs or standardized scores aiming to prevent negative educational outcomes, such as failing or dropping out, as lacking (Marks & Wade, 2015). Instead, positive psychologists in education examine "achievement, create opportunities for personal fulfillment, work on brainstorming solutions when facing choice points, emphasize the process of learning, and focus on strengths" (Marks & Wade, 2015, p. 12). A positive psychologist's research within education focuses on student strengths, teacher strengths, and the strengths of the educational organization as a whole to increase performance and success.

### **Ontology of Positive Psychology**

A positive psychologist's research ontology views everything through the lens of self and embraces individuality (Waterman, 2013). Yet, a

positive psychologist also understands the relational context of the individual. The research of a positive psychologist centers on the idea that self-reflection is essential for the individual, but recognizes self-actualization occurs when an individual is connected to a larger family, school, community, institution, or society (Peterson, 2013).

### **Epistemology of Positive Psychology**

A positive psychologist's epistemology acquires knowledge through self-examination. Analyzing one's historical, philosophical roots, and ways of knowing the world, is critical for self-understanding for both the individual and the collective (Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004). By using general principles of human psychology, positive psychologists examine individual and organizational strengths and choices, and apply the knowledge to greater society (Waterman, 2013).

### **Methodology of Positive Psychology**

Positive psychologists use systematic analysis methods to measure the human experience. Positive psychologists understand objects and subjects of research as conscious beings. Therefore, the subjects and researchers themselves are situated and formed by their own sense of self and view of humanity based on historical situations and formed experiences (Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004). Because of this, positive psychologists often prefer qualitative approaches that capture and articulate the unique human experience. Qualitative methods provide self-understanding opportunities by both the subject and researcher when analyzing the quality and authenticity of one's life. Whether using interviews, paper-and-pencil or computer-based instruments, or in counseling and coaching interactions, positive psychologists consider communication as the best evidence of an individual's self-concept and broader societal relationships (Waterman, 2013). Unfortunately, because a positive psychologist's research design may appear less empirical, more political, and influenced more by free will than other methods, positive psychologists have been accused of

“making naive assumptions about human nature and failing to address conceptual ambiguities” (Simmons, 2013, p. 46). Critics often view the methods of positive psychologists as making “grandiose claims without supporting evidence” (Simmons, 2013, p. 50).

### **Axiology of Positive Psychology**

A positive psychologist assumes that research cannot be value free (Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004). Thus, a positive psychologist attempts to remain objective in research yet never detach. Instead, within this framework, a positive psychologist's research would be guided by creating a meaningful experience for the subject and researcher. Positive psychologists try in their own work to concentrate on strengths to solve problems and produce competent work (Peterson, 2013). The motivation of the research is affecting change to allow humans to thrive. Empirical study for both the individual and the institution focus on such topics as well-being, effective coping, creativity, positive emotions, or flourishing to experience a life well lived (Schreiner, 2015). A positive psychologist's goal is producing engaging and meaningful research experiences, while advocating positive relationships for the individual within the greater educational organization.

### **Approaches to Student Success in Higher Education**

Higher education typically measures student success in terms of grades and graduation rates (Schreiner, 2015). However, the current graduation rate is around 43%, indicating the majority of students who start college do not complete a bachelor's degree within six years (Schreiner, 2015). Colleges and universities often aim to increase the graduation rate through admission selectivity (Schreiner, 2015). The premise behind this goal is relatively simple; in order to increase the graduation rate, schools seek to admit high achieving students with educated parents from a high economic status (Adelman, 2006).

However, such an approach leaves behind people of different ethnicities and goes against policies aimed at giving individuals an equal opportunity to earn some level of higher education (Schreiner, 2015).

Another approach to improving graduation rates is remediating students, which has led institutions of higher education to spend billions of dollars on remedial programs for particular classes deemed necessary for student success (Attewell, Lavin, Domina, & Levey, 2006). However, after controlling the variables of academic preparation, high school skills, and family background, this approach does not increase remediated students' likelihood of graduating (Attewell et al., 2006). Increasing admission criteria and offering remediation are both deficit driven attempts and offer little understanding of what is actually causing current low graduation rates and what can successfully be done to improve it. Repeatedly telling students about their weaknesses increases the chance of a self-fulfilling prophecy of defeat and contributes towards students dropping out of education (Marks & Wade, 2015).

Positive psychology shifts the perspective away from student weaknesses toward recognizing student strengths because accenting student weakness does nothing but hinder student motivation, which is an important component of student success (Schreiner, 2015). A strengths-based approach allows for more than one recipe of student success because students acknowledge, concentrate, and recognize their individual strengths, what motivates them, leading them to be more successful academically (Louis & Schreiner, 2012).

When building a case for the use of positive psychology in higher education, it is important to understand and communicate the benefits of this approach. Research has determined that positive psychology contributes to higher education in a multitude of areas related to the categories of student engagement (Noble & McGrath, 2015) and institutional effectiveness (Oades, Robinson, Green, & Spence, 2011), which will be examined in the following section.

### **Benefits of Positive Psychology from a Student Perspective**

The use of positive psychology and strengths-based education has the potential to drive the transformation of students in higher education. As previously mentioned, in an environment where 43% of students who enter college do not complete a bachelor's degree within six years (Schreiner, 2015), such transformation is imperative. Marks and Wade (2015) found that students lack critical awareness of the positive aspects of themselves. This lack of self-awareness is often the result of personal characteristics, cultural norms, and societal expectations. Research indicates that positive psychology serves to "improve the initiative, engagement, and self-efficacy of our youth" (Buck, Carr, & Robertson, 2008, p. 28), which contributes to a solid foundation for a student's personal and professional success.

The nature of positive psychology encourages people to flourish (Seligman, 2011). Empowering individuals to focus on their strengths can instill "high levels of emotional, psychological and social well-being. They also look beyond themselves and help others find meaning, purpose, and satisfaction in life" (Schreiner, 2015, p. 4). As such, positive psychology can have a ripple effect on students, as a student with strong self-awareness can serve as a model for other students and positive peer relationships can be formed. A comprehensive meta-analysis (Roseth, Johnson, & Johnson, 2008) that involved 148 studies from 11 countries found positive peer relationships accounted for 33% to 40% of the variance in academic achievement. There is a reciprocal link between student engagement, achievement and well-being such that "the more students are actively engaged and achieving in learning, the greater their sense of well-being and vice versa" (Noble & McGrath, 2015, p. 12).

Strengthening student engagement through the use of positive psychology can have a positive impact on students' success in learning experiences

outside of the classroom as well. Students who completed a *StrengthsFinder 2.0* assessment during a business internship experience were found to benefit from the application of positive psychology and the opportunity to identify and contribute their strengths in the workplace (Olsen, 2013). Tom Rath (2007), author of *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, determined that employees not working within their strengths zone were six times less likely to be engaged in their work environment. Lyubomirsky, King and Diener (2005) further supported Rath's assertions that individuals with a high sense of well-being are more likely to receive job interviews and are more productive on the job. By determining what students do well through the use of tools such as *StrengthsFinder 2.0*, "positive psychology suggests they can thrive, increase satisfaction, and attain authentic happiness" (Olsen, 2013, p. 164).

### **Benefits of Positive Psychology from an Institutional Perspective**

The application of positive psychology in higher education has benefits across the institution to include positive learning environments, administration and faculty environments, social environments, residential environments, and community environments (Oades et al., 2011).

### **Positive Learning Environments**

Extensive research reveals that positive, respectful and supportive relationships between students and teachers contribute to a multitude of desirable student outcomes such as class attendance, engagement and resilience (Noble & McGrath, 2015). Through positive psychology, educators can encourage students not only to identify new ways to apply their strengths, but also how to further develop their strengths and engage in the learning process. The ultimate goal of positive psychology is engaged learning, "whereby students meaningfully process what they are learning, attending to what is happening in the moment, and actively participating in the learning experience" (Schreiner, 2015, p. 12). When students have

positive learning experiences, they often share these experiences with others, which can result in positive word of mouth and a greater reputation for the institution.

### **Administration and Faculty Environments**

As trusted advisors to students, faculty and administrators are in a unique position to share positive psychology practices and create "the conditions for the enhancement of well-being in students" (Marks & Wade, 2015, p. 15). Through active engagement with students, administrators and faculty not only strengthen the student's esteem but also the student's affinity for the institution. However, institutions need to recognize the value of such engagement and invest in educating administration and faculty about positive psychology and rewarding their efforts to strengthen the student experience through such practices.

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### **Community Environments**

Institutions of higher education play a major role in the communities where they are located. Flourishing students can make a positive impact on these communities and the greater society, which serves to strengthen ‘town and gown’ relations. “For underrepresented students, this sense of community matters even more to their success and well-being: it is the major predictor of their thriving, not only interpersonally but also intrapersonally and academically” (Schreiner, 2015, p. 11).

### **Conclusion**

Evidence in support of positive psychology in higher education continues to grow as research recognizes the relationship between a person’s well-being and their personal and professional success in life (Ambler et al., 2015; Buck et al., 2008; Lopez, 2006; Louise & Schreiner, 2012). Higher education is in a time of transition as technology and finances are at the forefront of the competitive structure. As such, a conversation must continue about the importance of not merely obtaining a degree but also creating a transformative experience for students as they prepare for rewarding careers.

As positive psychology is applied to higher education, expect to see students working to their potential, understanding their individual strengths, engaging in healthy social and emotional campus cultures, and fostering enduring relationships between administration, faculty, and other students. Fostering student thriving and increasing engagement through student strengths-based initiatives is the advantage colleges and universities need to remain innovative and competitive.

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