The Impact of Positive Psychology on Higher Education

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Abstract

Research identifies the contributions of positive psychology to higher education success through an emphasis on strengths-based education. This paper examines the dynamics of higher education, defines positive psychology, discusses various approaches to student success, and evaluates the benefits of positive psychology on student engagement and institutional effectiveness. By applying strengths-based education within colleges and universities, educators can exercise positive psychology to enhance students' growth by helping these students to thrive and flourish in their personal and professional lives.

Keywords: higher education, positive psychology, strengths-based, student success

The field of higher education has adopted positive psychology's strengths-based approach to 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, and positive psychology will then be explored 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. Finally, this in-depth review of the literature will analyze the benefits of a positive-psychological approach to 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, began using a model that examined a student's talents and strengths rather than focusing on the remediation of 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 viewed as accessible only for the elite (Bok, 2006). After World War II ended in 1945, college enrollment increased due to the G.I. Bill's provision of educational funds for veterans. With an increasingly diverse student population, institutions of higher education expanded, and faculty narrowed their scope (Schreiner, 2015). In doing so, higher education institutions started to teach skills for specific jobs after graduation,

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-centered education 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 attract an increasing number of students (Gardner, 2005; Thelin, 2004). Private institutions of higher education were able to offer accelerated programs or smaller class sizes that were more appealing than the offerings from larger public institutions (Thelin, 2004). For this reason, private institutions were able to be more selective about their admissions processes, and therefore garnered reputations as prestigious institutions. In an effort to emulate the success of private institutions, public institutions sought to develop similar offerings, resulting in intense industry competition (Thelin, 2004). Unfortunately, this dynamic, competitive environment 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).

As a result of this market-based shift in educational ideology, colleges and universities became more concerned with national rankings and reputations rather than student development and success (Arum & Roksa, 2011; Thelin, 2004). This emphasis on national rankings led to investments in new buildings instead of new programs designed to heighten students' personal development (Arum & Roksa, 2011); however, a growing number of researchers now recommend a return to strengths-based education and student development objectives (Schreiner, 2015; Thelin, 2004). 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 elected president in 1998 (as cited in Froh, 2004); however, the term actually originated with Abraham Maslow in his 1954 seminal book, *Motivation and Personality* (as cited in Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Building on Maslow's research, Seligman believed that clinical psychology had become consumed with the topic of mental illness and an emphasis on drug treatment (as cited in 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 commu-

nity involvement (Schreiner, 2010). Research suggests that these characteristics can be taught and linked to academic success (Schreiner, Pothoven, Nelson, & McIntosh, 2009). Thriving helps 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 postsecondary schools (Louis & Schreiner, 2012). Strengths-based education targets student success rather than grades and graduation rates as it empowers individuals to develop fulfilling and productive lives (Schreiner, 2015). Positive psychologists see educational programs or standardized scores that aim to prevent negative educational outcomes (e.g., 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" (p. 12). A positive psychologist's research within education focuses on the strengths of students, teachers, and the organi-

zation as a whole to increase student performance and success.

Ontology of Positive Psychology

Ontology is the study of being, or "what is" the nature of existence and reality (Crotty, 1998, p. 10). 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 while recognizing that self-actualization occurs when an individual is connected to a larger family, school, community, institution, or society (Peterson, 2013).

Epistemology of Positive Psychology

Epistemology is the nature of knowledge, or "how we know what we know" (Crotty, 1998, p. 8). A positive psychologist's epistemology views knowledge acquisition through self-examination. Analyzing one's historical and 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 organization-

al strengths and choices and apply the knowledge to greater society (Waterman, 2013).

Methodology of Positive Psychology

Crotty (1998) defined methodology as the plan, strategy, or process used to gather data. Positive psychologists use systematic, analytical 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, which is based on historical situations and formed experiences (Jorgensen & Nafstad, 2004). Consequently, positive psychologists often prefer qualitative approaches that capture and articulate the unique human experience. Qualitative methods provide self-understanding opportunities for both the participant and researcher when analyzing the quality and authenticity of one's life. Whether using interviews, paper-and-pencil or computer-based instruments, or counseling and coaching interactions, positive psychologists consider communication to be 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 more biased 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" (p. 50).

Axiology of Positive Psychology

Axiology is the study of values (Crotty, 1998). 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 detached. Instead, within this framework, a positive psychologist's research would be guided by creating a meaningful experience for the participant and researcher. Positive psychologists try in their own work to concentrate on strengths to solve problems and produce competent work (Peterson, 2013). The motivation for their research is affecting change to allow humans to thrive. Empirical studies of both individuals and institutions 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 mean-

ingful research experiences while advocating positive relationships for the individual within the greater educational organization.

Approaches to Student Success in Higher Education

Higher education institutions typically measure student success in terms of grades and graduation rates (Schreiner, 2015); however, the current graduation rate is around 43%, indicating that the majority of students who start college do not complete a bachelor's degree within six years (Schreiner, 2015). As a result, colleges and universities often aim to increase graduation rates through admission selectivity (Schreiner, 2015). The premise behind this goal is relatively simple. To increase graduation rates, institutions seek to admit high-achieving students with educated parents from a high-economic status (Adelman, 2006); however, this approach excludes people of different ethnicities and refutes policies aimed at establishing equal opportunity in 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). Unfortu-

nately, after controlling the variables of academic preparation, high school skills, and family background, this approach did 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 rates of graduation and what can be done to improve it. Repeatedly telling students about their weaknesses increases the chance of self-fulfilling a 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 and motivations, leading them greater academic success (Louis & Schreiner, 2012). The following section will analyze the benefits of positive psychology to both students and institutions of higher education.

Benefits of Positive Psychology in Higher Education

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).

Benefits of Positive Psychology from a Student Perspective

The use of positive psychology and a strengths-based approach to 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 lacked critical awareness of the positive aspects of themselves, and 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 that positive peer relationships accounted for 33%–40% of the variance in academic achievement. A reciprocal link exists 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, including positive learning environments, administration and faculty environments, social environments, residential environments, and community environments (Oades et al., 2011).

Positive Learning Environments

Extensive research demonstrated 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 to identify new ways of applying their strengths, help them 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 unique positions to utilize 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, adminis-

trators and faculty not only strengthen the student's esteem but also the student's affinity for the institution; therefore, 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.

Social Environment

In addition to fostering a supportive learning environment, positive psychology serves to strengthen social environments in higher education (Marks & Wade, 2015). Many organizations, such as student affairs and wellness centers, already exist on college campuses that naturally support concepts related to positive psychology. Within student organizations, faculty advisors can strive to apply positive psychology techniques as well. For example, if a student organization is encountering difficulties recruiting members, a faculty advisor can posit constructive questions to recall previous success, such as, "*When have we been successful in engaging members in the past?*" Reflecting on past success can "create positive momentum, inspiring members to begin to brainstorm options and ideas, such as using social media more effectively and consistently, and then create and implement plans based on these

notions" (p. 12).

Residential Environments

Living in a campus, residential environment is often one of the most formidable learning experiences for students. The practice of positive psychology in residential environments can foster a sense of community that is built upon with collaboration and respect. The University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia recently launched the world's first "positive residence–planned and run entirely on the science of positive psychology, designed to enhance the students' academic and social experiences" (Hartgerink, 2013, para. 1). At the College of William & Mary, programs in Campus Living "are designed to promote engagement in the residential communities as well as healthy interpersonal relationships among diverse residents" (Ambler, Crace, & Fisler, 2015, p. 26). Ultimately, a positive residential environment not only meets the needs of current students but also serves as an attractive attribute for prospective students when deciding on a college to attend.

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-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 researchers recognize 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.

If positive psychology is applied to higher education, we increase the likelihood of seeing 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 are advantages colleges and universities need to remain innovative and competitive.

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