Lawrence I. Marks and John C. Wade discuss student well-being as an important, and often overlooked, factor for student success. They describe three themes of positive psychology—focusing on strengths, optimal performance, and positive emotions—as particularly useful approaches to fostering well-being.

By Lawrence I. Marks and John C. Wade

Positive Psychology on Campus: Creating the Conditions for Well-Being and Success

EACH YEAR, HIGH SCHOOL seniors and their parents look at the periodicals, publications, and websites that publish the popular rankings of colleges and universities in order to obtain information about which school is the best fit for them. These rankings typically consider data such as admission test scores, retention rates, class sizes, graduation rates, job placement services and percentages, tuition, and student debt. Others focus on current student ratings of various aspects of their college experience from their professors or classes to campus dining options. No one would suggest that these variables are not important. Indeed, when promoting themselves, colleges and universities frequently highlight these metrics and other factors such as their on-campus housing options, new wellness center features, student leadership opportunities, external funding amounts, and so on. However, prominently missing from any of these college ranking lists or institutional marketing materials is information on student well-being or how satisfied, happy, or engaged students feel in different aspects of their lives. If colleges and universities were gauged on students' well-being, how might your institution rank?

In a 2010 TED Talk titled "Measuring What Makes Life Worthwhile," hotel CEO Chip Conley compellingly argued that what we measure matters—in other words, what we count truly counts. Even at a global level, Conley, along with prominent positive psychology researchers Ed Diener and Martin Seligman, has proposed that in addition to economically based measures to assess a country's functioning such as gross domestic product (GDP), governments should also measure the population's well-being, sometimes referred to as gross national happiness (GNH), in order

Published online in Wiley Online Library (wileyonlinelibrary.com)

DOI: 10.1002/abc.21174

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to get a true and fuller assessment of national prosperity. In 2012 the United Nations adopted a resolution recognizing "the relevance of happiness and well-being as universal goals and aspirations in the lives of human beings around the world and the importance of their recognition in public policy objectives." Conley noted that although governments cannot directly cause people to be happy, they do have considerable influence through implementing policies and directing resources to create the conditions for well-being to increase. The same principle applies to colleges and universities. Although higher education institutions cannot directly cause individual students to thrive or flourish in their college experience, through application of positive psychology, colleges and universities can create the right conditions for students to enhance their own well-being and thereby more fully meet their potential.

Why is investing in, measuring, and promoting student well-being important? Of course, we want our students to feel satisfied in the various aspects of their lives, such as academics/career, social relationships, finances, and physical and mental health. More importantly, though, research in positive psychology informs us that greater student well-being is a vital key to success and achievement in college and beyond, outcomes that students ultimately want from their higher education experience. Individuals' self-rating of their overall well-being has been associated with a number of positive effects, including greater learning, productivity, and resiliency. While traditional methods of education and programming—whether taking place in the classroom, lab, academic resource center, or the residence hall—can develop skills that in turn facilitate achievement, they do not necessarily lead to the development or enhancement of lasting well-being.

Focusing on personal strengths, positive emotions, well-being, and factors related to success and thriving can connect with an inner sense of hope and an uplifting desire for growth and constructive change. Indeed, there is a congruency between these concepts of positive psychology and the focus on growth, acquiring knowledge and skills, and nurturing of talent and potential that defines higher education. Encouraging students' well-being supports higher education institutions' goals of creating opportunities for success, supporting academic achievement, and developing well-rounded, high-functioning students. Furthermore, we have found that a positive psychology approach, including focusing on well-being and goal achievement, is often experienced as motivating and is well received by students.

Our interest in positive psychology and its implications for higher education led to us bringing together scholars in the field to contribute to the book *Positive Psychology on the College Campus*, which describes research and practical applications for fostering student development and success through positive psychology–based strategies and interventions. Through this work and our efforts to keep informed in this rapidly growing subject area, we have been able to get a bird's-eye view of positive psychology on campus. A number of concepts have been studied, and several themes seem to be emerging related to applications for student development and education, including identifying, developing, and using strengths; reaching for optimal performance; and the benefits of positive emotions. While not an exhaustive list, for this article we have selected these three themes to highlight ways that positive psychology constructs can be informative and useful in developing student well-being and success.

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Identifying, Developing, and Using Strengths

WHEN WE ASK STUDENTS about their strengths—what they do best, what they like about themselves, or what others admire about them, those personal talents, qualities, and skills that make them unique and special—they often either don't know how to respond or get stuck after listing only a few characteristics. It is striking how little awareness students have of these important positive aspects of themselves. In contrast, when asked to name their weaknesses, typically a number of points seem to easily come to mind. Their low-strengths awareness may be due to several factors, ranging from cultural norms, societal expectations, or personality traits of humbleness and not wanting to brag, to simply not recognizing their strengths because they come more easily and seem like normal thinking/behavior (e.g., "I've always been good at math so it didn't stand out"; "Aren't most people creative?"). Moreover, students may have experienced parents, coaches, and teachers pointing out areas of needed improvement or what they got wrong rather than focusing more on what they did well or got correct. Although well-intended, focusing more heavily on weaknesses tends to be draining and discouraging. Beyond the utilitarian value of perhaps having a prepared answer for the classic interview question "What are your strengths and weaknesses?" helping students to identify their strengths enables them to feel more inspired and motivated, gain a fuller picture of themselves, and perhaps use their strengths to address areas of desired improvement.

The use of well-established measures such as the VIA Survey (www.viacharacter.org) and StrengthsQuest (www.strengthsquest.com) can facilitate identifying and discussing strengths. When universities use one of these popular standardized assessments, it begins to provide a common language and understanding that can be shared and appreciated by the campus community. Alternatively, with prompting from educators, students can generate a list of strengths by being asked questions such as "What are you doing when you are at your best?" "Describe one of your greatest past accomplishments," or "What have friends said to you about what they like about you?" This approach can allow for more personally and culturally meaningful strengths to be explored.

The next step after helping students to more fully identify their strengths is to help them consider how they can use their strengths and apply them to both new and routine situations. Research has found that people who report using their strengths experience myriad benefits, including increased well-being; higher self-confidence; more resiliency; greater goal achievement; improved health behaviors; and increased productivity, performance, and engagement at work and school. When we help our students to think about the areas of work or school in which they feel most passionate, most enjoy themselves, and are most effective, and point out that this usually reflects an area in which strengths are being tapped, they begin to understand the usefulness of knowing and using their strengths. Being able to identify and use strengths can be advantageous in many different realms of academic and student affairs including academic advising, teaching, career counseling, and leadership. Students are most likely to experience success through applying and further developing their strengths than by trying to remediate weaknesses. The business major who is struggling to earn a C in a basic math course is unlikely to become an accountant, but continuing to develop her creative talent may lead to a successful career in marketing. Moreover, focusing on strengths tends to be energizing, engaging, and motivating for students.

With this more complete knowledge about themselves, students can identify ways they can better contribute in classes, peer groups, and jobs. When students in a team or diverse group of peers take time to talk about each member's strengths, they can see how they can effectively work together, support each other, appreciate their differences, and draw on the abilities of specific members to accomplish certain goals, and in turn each member feels valued and understood. Our initial human tendency is often to feel the most comfortable with those most like us. But having duplicating strengths on a team is unlikely to yield good results. No matter how talented each player is, a football team of 11 quarterbacks would be ineffective. However, if we can teach students to use a strength-based approach, they can recognize the value that each member brings to their team or group—that Kevin is outgoing and a good communicator, Leah is artistic, Andre is detail oriented, and Emily is a skilled leader. Based on the diverse strengths and talents of each group member, the roles each person has in the group become clearer to everyone and people tend to feel more engaged in the process. This approach can help reverse the dreaded feeling that sometimes arises in students when they anticipate working in groups.

Educators can work with students not only to identify and find new ways to use their strengths, but to explore how to further develop strengths. Helping students to know when and where to apply strengths and when to hold back can aid them in their work with others. For instance, a student who enjoys being analytical and systematically approaching ideas and

issues can use this strength to help identify potential problems before they occur in group projects or lab settings. However, it is possible that he may come across as critical, even though that is not his intention, and thus it will be important for him to be thoughtful about how and when he expresses his viewpoint. As another example, a student who is strong in leadership also needs to be flexible and adaptable with the use of her skills, recognizing when to lead as well as when to listen and to encourage others' ideas to be heard.

Faculty and staff who know and give emphasis to their students' strengths can create positive expectations, develop more engaging relationships with their students, and see past struggles and focus more on possibilities, as well as increase students' well-being. Take the case of a student who has attended several academic advising appointments, is not doing well in his classes, and is undecided about his major. While acknowledging his difficulties, the advisor can also look for where the student previously has been successful and instill hope through conveying his potential, which engages the student and assists him to feel more confident about his abilities and motivated to seek out further resources. Educators can also model a strengths focus by knowing, using, and developing their own strengths. When we emphasize using our best qualities, it naturally leads to increased chances for success and excellent performance.

Reaching for Optimal Performance

APPLYING POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY TO EDUCATION pushes us to look beyond adequate or normal functioning and to examine factors that lead to success. We may create effective programs to help at-risk students with good merit, but even these initiatives' goals tend to be aimed at averting negative outcomes, such as not failing or dropping out. Efforts based in positive psychology set the bar higher by focusing on not just standard levels of academic and personal achievement, but to stretch beyond that toward optimal performance for individuals, groups, or institutions. It is about finding ways of fulfilling one's full potential and living one's individually and culturally defined best possible life.

Studying success and examining what is working and what is right with students, departments, or organizations often reveals pathways that can lead to desired positive outcomes. Whatever topic, focus, or issue receives our energy and attention tends to grow and expand. We can guide this energy and attention by drawing on the field of Appreciative Inquiry (AI), which is grounded in the premise that identifying and appreciating the strengths already present in an individual or organization can cause them to amplify. To illustrate, an advisor might use AI when working with a student organization that is having problems with recruiting members and communication between the leaders and members. The advisor could ask constructively oriented questions that tap into successes such as "When have you been successful in gaining members?" or "What is happening when the communication seems to be flowing well?" The recalling of past and current successes 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. The intent is to be curious about ways of fostering optimal performance through valuing, building on, and using factors that have been successful.

When we encourage students to focus on factors that contribute to achievement, create opportunities for personal fulfillment, work on brainstorming solutions when facing choice points, emphasize the process of learning, and focus on strengths, we are encouraging the development of a growth mind-set, Carol Dweck's term for thinking that one's abilities and talents can be further developed versus remaining unalterable or fixed. Emphasizing how effort can lead to improved performance in areas such as taking tests, intramural competitions, or finding an internship helps to promote this growth mind-set and can increase student motivation and engagement. A similar concept is Christine Robitschek's personal growth initiative (PGI), which details the process of personal growth. The four components of PGI are: (1) identifying areas of growth and the timing of change, (2) developing a plan for growth, (3) awareness and use of resources

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that can be helpful, and (4) the intentional behavior of actually following through with the plans for personal growth and engaging in the self-change process. The components can be described using an example of a student who identifies that she wants to expand her social network. Along with recognizing this area of growth, considering the timing of her efforts is the important first step with PGI. She's more likely to make progress at the beginning of a semester when more opportunities are present than near the end of the semester when everyone is focused on finals. Next, she will want to develop a specific plan for changing by finding ways of connecting with existing friends and developing new relationships through learning about how to get involved on campus. The third element is her awareness and use of available resources, such as the campus student activities office or well-connected friends. Finally, she will want to be intentional about following through with her plans and engaging in the process of growth. Usually, having a realistic perspective combined with small, achievable steps is helpful. Educators can look to encourage and assist students in their intentional growth-oriented behavior where possible. Developing a growth mind-set and engaging in the PGI process can contribute to students' well-being and more effectively achieving personal goals.

Reaching for optimal performance involves setting and working toward goals. However, the specific steps involved in working toward and accomplishing goals are not always deliberately labeled as such when students are engaging in college activities such as choosing a major, improving their social relationships, planning a sorority event, or studying for the GRE. Translating these pursuits as goals to achieve or growth areas to pursue can provide students with a useful mind-set and subsequently a clearer approach toward reaching what they want to achieve, which is something that they will benefit from both in college and after graduation. The likelihood of success can be improved by drawing on positive psychology strategies when coaching students, such as exploring how goals fit with personal values, interests, and meaning; differentiating between intrinsic goals, which are more internally rewarding (such as serving others), and extrinsic goals, which involve observable rewards (such as making money); developing and using a social support network; being realistically optimistic; engendering a feeling of hope; or writing about when they are functioning at their best.

The expectations others have of us as well as our expectations for ourselves can impact optimal performance. Research suggests that telling students they have high potential results in increased performance (the more specific and on-target this feedback is, the more effective it is). Low expectations have the opposite effect. Imagine the effect on performance of an intramural team who maintains optimism and expects to win throughout a challenging game versus a team that feels no hope, or the impact on classwork when an instructor praises a student's creative thinking and sets an expectation for quality work versus an instructor who gives discouraging feedback. (Providing constructive comments is needed for change, but it can be more effective if they are nonjudgmental, deal with specifics and not generalizations, and describe how to improve and the potential to do so.) There is a self-fulfilling prophecy that underlies these expectations. We can facilitate positive expectations and an optimistic outlook for students by keeping their strengths in mind, recalling past successes, being realistic, providing inspirational examples of success, and encouraging persistence.

Reaching for optimal performance is not just about the end goal but the process. The ultimate mission of the university is not only to teach content but to foster within students a way of engaging, learning, and relating to the world that they will be able to apply to new situations throughout their lives and their careers. Interpersonal and intrapersonal skills such as getting along with others, emotional intelligence, resiliency, problem-solving ability, identifying steps for goal achievement, seeing challenges as opportunities, and being able to perform at optimal levels are qualities increasingly prized by employers. We can intentionally facilitate these outcomes by both educating students on the strategies for developing these skills and aspects of well-being and by giving them the opportunity to learn the process through practice and experience. When students pursue optimal

performance and when they experience themselves making progress, positive emotions are generated, which further cultivates their well-being and success.

The Benefits of Positive Emotions

A FOUNDATIONAL AND ENRICHING CONTRIBUTION of positive psychology is the elucidation of the benefits of positive emotions. Research on Barbara Fredrickson's broaden-and-build theory has found that with increased experiences of positive emotions such as joy, gratitude, hope, inspiration, interest, and serenity, students' thinking is broadened and becomes clearer, more open-minded, and more creative. In addition, with increased positive emotions, students build resiliency, learn more, and develop new skills. In contrast, increased negative emotions (e.g., irritation, regret, worry) tends to cause thinking to be narrowed and resiliency to be weakened.

Positive emotions are valuable not only because they feel good but because they contribute to well-being, productivity, learning, growing, and performing more effectively. This robust effect has been demonstrated by research that has measured existing positive versus negative emotions in individuals in a given time frame or has experimentally instilled positive emotions in participants versus negative or neutral emotions. Specific results include that with greater positive emotional states, students perform better on tests, can brainstorm more possible solutions to both personal and practical problems, tend to feel more connected to friends, experience improved physical health, are more helpful to others, and feel increased motivation to achieve goals. Overall, this research has consistently shown that experiencing more positive emotions in relation to negative emotions leads to greater well-being and flourishing in life. At the same time, it is important to keep in mind that a positive psychological approach appreciates that negative emotions are an inevitable and meaningful part of life, and these emotions should not be ignored. In addition, evolutionary psychologists suggest that we may be hard-wired to attend to the negative as this may help us in surviving threats. Negative emotions help keep people balanced and sensible. They can also have a stronger impact than positive emotions. This means that for most of us, we need to apply intentional effort to reach a greater ratio of positive emotions in order experience the benefits.

Finding healthy ways for students to create positive emotions is the implication for us as we work with students. Given the potential results, it is a task that typically is not hard to sell. It might be a simple activity, such as faculty suggesting that students watch an uplifting video before taking an exam. Or the practice might be more involved, such as developing hope or gratitude. Hope can be increased through the process of setting and making progress toward goals. Educators can facilitate this progress and thereby a feeling of hope by exploring with students the two elements of Rick Snyder's theory of hope: their thoughts about their ability to reach a goal (agency thinking) and their thoughts about the practical steps involved in achieving a goal (pathways thinking). Gratitude can be developed by reflecting, talking, or writing about things for which students feel thankful. Keeping a gratitude journal can be a great way for students to be more attentive to what is going well in their lives. In addition, volunteer or service-learning activities provide a wonderful opportunity to experience positive emotions in the process of doing kind deeds for others. When talking with students about their various activities, ask them to pay attention to and discuss the positive emotions they felt during their experiences. Note that awareness and savoring of positive emotions is more than just a cognitive exercise; it is the genuine felt experience that underlies the power in the emotions.

Another effective way to facilitate the increase of positive emotions is to support the development of meaningful social relationships. As Seligman noted when he posited that positive relationships are an important component to well-being, "very little that is positive is solitary" (p. 20). Although universities probably shouldn't run a matchmaker service to find friends or relationship partners, higher learning institutions can create the right conditions for strong social and interpersonal relationships to be more likely to develop. Social media has helped in increasing the opportunity for interpersonal connections, but taking steps to set the stage for meaningful friendships to develop, in addition to the traditional venue of the first year residence hall, can be valuable. Examples range from encouraging collaborative work on volunteer projects or student led activities to coordinating lunch conversation programs that pair native students with international students or incoming students with seniors. Efforts such as these can increase students' social well-being and related positive emotions and foster a greater sense of connection with the university community.

Preparation for Life: Developing Well-Being and Success

A 2014 POLL BY GALLUP AND PURDUE UNIVERSITY of over 30,000 college graduates from the United States revealed that those who rated their engagement in college and the support that they perceived from the institution as high were more likely to

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be currently engaged at work and thriving in areas of well-being compared to those who rated their college engagement and support as low. Especially notable was that this finding was consistent across all sizes and types of higher education institutions, lending evidence to the important impact of experiencing well-being during college. Teaching students about well-being and success and creating the conditions across various campus venues for enhancing well-being adds value to their college experience and prepares them to be successful throughout life.

Consultants and coaches have been encouraging businesses and organizations to pay attention to employee well-being beyond just having a fitness center on-site, and businesses like Google, Ritz-Carlton, and Zappos, which have incorporated a well-being focus (beyond physical well-being) into their company culture, often have seen increased profits and more engaged employees. Colleges and universities may be lagging behind this effort to some degree. While campuses increasingly compete to attract students with state-of-the-art facilities and stimulating learning opportunities, these same institutions may not be as focused on promoting the well-being of their students.

Purposefully investing energy and resources into developing student well-being is essential, not only for its own sake, but because it has the ripple effect of positively impacting students' personal, relational, academic, and career success today and as they become leaders in their fields after graduation. Positive psychology offers practical, rewarding, and empirically supported methods for educators to advance the well-being of their students through efforts such as encouraging talents and strengths to emerge and develop, nurturing the pursuit of excellence, and fostering positive emotions. The promotion and measurement of well-being within and across universities will further facilitate the positive impact of embracing and developing well-being on student success. To paraphrase Chip Conley, although university administrators, faculty, and staff cannot directly raise each individual student's well-being, we can all exert significant influence by creating the conditions for the enhancement of well-being in our students. The important role that universities have in the development of the whole person was a foundational belief in the earliest universities in both ancient Greece and early America. For universities to be on the forefront of producing students prepared to have meaningful, fulfilling, and successful lives and careers, it is essential that educators intentionally focus on students' well-being and success, which simultaneously connects with higher education's historical roots and present-day endeavors.

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