

## Generations

# Colleges trying to teach students to be happy

A recent article in *The Philadelphia Inquirer* caught my eye in that it reported on courses being made available in colleges that are geared toward teaching students to be happy.

Students at the University of Pennsylvania were typically asked to give a one-sentence introduction in every new class. Usually, it's been a monotone dissertation of the student's age, major and past studies. However, in a new course titled "The Pursuit of Happiness," students are forced to introduce themselves with a personal anecdote that they believe shows them at their best.

Not an easy task, especially for the new college student who doesn't want to stick out but rather melt into a class of 50 or more until he or she can get grounded. However, an assignment is an assignment, and students were compelled to share stories about themselves, some reluctantly, others willing

to talk longer than the allotted two minutes.



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The course is the first large-scale class at Penn to focus on the practice of positive psychology, which is the scientific study of

what goes well in life and how to cultivate more of it.

Nearly 200 students are enrolled in the class, double a typical lecture course. The point of the assignment, said James Pawelski, professor of the course, forces students to build deeper connections with each other, and it comes at a time when universities across the country are desperate for new ways to improve mental health on campus.

A 2018 study found college students are reporting increasing levels of depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts for the eighth year in a row. While many colleges, including

Penn, have hired more counselors and increased counseling center hours, some are wondering if there's more to be done. Can they stop the problem before it begins and teach students to be more resilient, mentally healthier and maybe even happier?

According to Pawelski: "Happiness isn't one size fits all. We can't just dole it out to everybody. Our goal in class is to explore the pursuit of happiness together."

The course encourages students to try meditation or journaling, and teaches them to build stronger relationships, which are known to boost happiness. The introduction of students at the beginning of a class uses two core concepts of positive psychology: emphasizing individual strengths and building human connections. The result? There's an instant kinship, and students tend to remember each other more easily. Rather than simply passing each other in the hallways, a nod or

a simple "hi" can make all the difference to a shy student struggling to fit into the new world of an often lonely first year of college.

More than a decade of research has shown that teaching youth resilience and positive psychology can reduce and prevent symptoms of depression and anxiety, lower stress, and promote well-being. It can also improve grades.

Similar courses at Harvard and Yale drew more than 1,000 students each. Temple University created a Resiliency Resource Center with tools for students to use their own strengths to address depression, anxiety and interpersonal conflict. The program offers "mindfulness-based strengths practice," where up to 10 students come together for eight weekly sessions to learn how they can use their character strengths to cope with problems and increase happiness. Begun in fall 2017, it has grown to two eight-week sessions per semester to accommodate

the demand.

Martin Seligman, known as "the father of positive psychology," founded the Penn Positive Psychology Center in 2003. He and Pawelski started the Master of Positive Psychology program the same year, the first graduate degree in the field. The center also conducts large-scale resilience training for the U.S. Army. Yet Penn was years behind other schools in offering a large-scale positive-psychology class for all undergraduates.

On the first day of class, students were asked to pretend they were meeting people while walking around New York City. First, they introduced themselves to people who were not interested in meeting them. Not an easy task approaching a hardened New Yorker in a hurry. Next, they introduced themselves to powerful people, like CEOs, and it became easier. Finally, they introduced themselves to friends they hadn't seen in five years

and, as one sophomore business major reports, "Each time it got progressively more enjoyable to introduce myself," and it changed the way he began to interact with people. At a recent visit to an Apple Store, he made sure to introduce himself in the eye and smile. He asked how his day was going, and an instant rapport was built.

It sounds like a small step, but it's a step in the right direction. It might be a good idea to offer classes like this to high school students with the hope that it might also trickle down to the younger set. The goal of the sessions is to help students find ways to use their strengths to improve their lives and, in this day and age of stress for our youngsters, it may be more valuable than sitting through a class in algebra.

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