2016

Evaluating Positive Psychology Curriculum Among Nontraditional Students in a Foundational Course

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Walden University
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Abstract

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of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Psychology

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Abstract

Positive psychology emphasizes growth, adaptive functioning, and human potential. The present study contributes to this literature by examining the impact of exposure to a positive psychology curriculum among nontraditional students taking foundational courses in a career college. Mixed methods were utilized to assess changes in student well-being and goal setting quantitatively through pre- and post-tests of the Authentic Happiness Survey and the Satisfaction with Life Scale as well as identifying emergent themes from qualitative analysis of student reflections and written assignments over a 9-week term. Twenty-five students participated in foundational courses, which placed an emphasis on positive psychology. Paired samples *t* tests, Cohen's *d,* thematic analysis, and a researcher-designed Likert-scale assessed changes from the beginning of the course to the end among the quantitative and qualitative measures of overall well-being and goal attainment. Some of the notable findings included significantly positive changes in students' reports of authentic happiness, and 76% of students reporting that they had attained an academic, social, and personal goal over the course of the 9-week curriculum. Change in self-reported satisfaction with life approached, but it was not statistically significant. Thus, the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a nontraditional student population created positive social change in this particular sector of academia and was associated with increased overall well-being and attainment of goals.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my father and mother, Jerrold and Trudy Hilton, my husband, Charles Rhodes, my daughters, Kate and Julie, daughter-in-law, Jennifer Xu, my father-in-law, Raymond Rhodes, my mentor, Dr. John R. Kilcoyne, and my dear friend Judy Lev.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Given that positive psychology has its roots in the human potential movement of the 1960s and 1970s, and its founding fathers are considered to be Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow, introductory psychology texts tend to touch only briefly on their significance and influence, and they are often given only minimal consideration in foundational college textbooks. Rogers' focused on enhancing human potential, and while not totally rejecting the disease model, he sought to facilitate individuals' abilities to experience self-directed personal growth, creativity, unconditional positive regard, and self-actualization (Farson, 1974; Heim, 2011; Rogers, 1969). Rogers was influential not only in areas of counseling and organizational psychology, but also in the fields of education and business (Heim, 2011).

Rogers' research in the field of education indicated that the most effective teachers were those who showed empathy, had close relationships with their students, set high expectations for goal accomplishment, mastered knowledge of the curriculum, and were skillful in their delivery (Rogers, 1969). Maslow developed the hierarchy of needs, and within the educational realm, he believed that the purpose of education was to help an individual discover his/her own identity as a whole, integrated, self-actualized person (Carter, 2014; Maslow, 1980). The humanistic psychologists believed that every person had the potential to create and shape his/her ideal self. This potential was accomplished when individuals were held in unconditional positive regard, treated with empathy, seen as innately good, experienced congruence with their beliefs and self-concept, and had the

capacity to reach self-actualization through self-directed behavior and endeavors (Maslow, 1980; Rogers, 1969).

Positive psychology built on Rogers' and Maslow's precepts that individuals need not dwell on neuroses, dysfunction, and childhood traumas, but rather on psychological health, self-actualization, and well-being (Begum, Jabeen, & Awan, 2014). The next generation of positive psychologists would build on these ideals: "human goodness and excellence are as authentic as disease, disorder, and distress" (Peterson, 2006, p. 5). Thus, positive psychologists' research today revolves around the characteristics, strengths, virtues, and behaviors of individuals who are not deemed psychologically dysfunctional, but rather are psychologically healthy.

Background

Freudian theory proposed the human condition as prone to neuroticism, hysteria, psychopathology, and the death wish (Easterbrook 2001; Freud, 1952). Seligman stated that what psychology should focus on is the life well-lived via individuals' human strengths and virtues (2011). Seligman did not suggest that individuals should perceive the world through a naïve "Pollyanna" lens, but they should recognize that change and challenge are inevitable and that teaching individuals *learned optimism*, rather than *learned helplessness*, is the key to treating unipolar depression, victimization, and unrealistic expectations regarding self-esteem (Seligman, 1990, 1998). Seligman spent most of his career addressing depression and how to alleviate its symptoms. After his discoveries, which involved demonstrating the phenomenon of learned helplessness with dogs, this led to what motivates individuals to overcome the obstacles in their lives. His primary work involved

the characteristics of pessimists and people who were clinically depressed. The theory of learned helplessness posited that individuals come to perceive adverse circumstances as uncontrollable, and thus become "helpless," even when they can respond effectively to mitigate aversive circumstances.

The cognitive component of pessimism, and conversely, optimism, is something that can be conditioned, which is linked to behavior, according to Seligman's theories. Seligman decided to explore learned optimism, rather than learned helplessness, and from this sprouted the theories of positive psychology (Seligman, 1990, 1998). Positive psychology arose partly out of a reaction to the pervasive attention given to illness and dysfunction. Ninety-five percent of all psychological research and literature has involved dysfunction and disease model over the past 50 years with a ratio of 375,000 articles pertaining to negative emotions to 1000 articles on positive psychological constructs (Seligman, 2002; Shults 2008).

Subsequently, Seligman and Peterson (2004) created what they coined the "Manual of the Sanities," *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification* (2004). This book is a classification system for human character strengths and virtues; a positive psychological response to the *American Psychiatric Association diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders DSM-V* (2013). In order for positive psychology to be viewed as a serious, scientific endeavor in the field of psychology, empirical research would be required to use rigorous, replicable methods (Seligman, 2011).

Research Using Positive Psychology Psychotherapy

In a population of undergraduates, the study by Seligman, Rashid, and Parks (2006) on the use of positive psychology exercises in the form of positive psychology psychotherapy (PPT) has been associated with reduced symptoms of depression and increased overall well-being and happiness. The authors recruited a sample of 40 students who tested as mildly to moderately depressed according to the Beck Depression Inventory–II (Beck & Steer, 1992). As a means of change measurement to assess well-being, the study participants also took the inventory Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Over a 6-week period, participants engaged in such exercises as writing gratitude letters, counting blessings, imagining one's ideal self and ideal life, using one's strengths in novel ways, and savoring various experiences in their lives. Their BDI-IIs scores were reduced by .096 points, ($p < .003$) and their SWLS was increased by.77 points ($p < .001$)(Seligman, Rashid, & Parks, 2006). Participants were tracked 3 months, 6 months, and 12 months after the initial experiment.

Mongrain and Anselmo-Matthews (2012) conducted a replication of this experiment with a sample of 1,447 participants, of which 344 completed it. In the replication, the researchers used the Steen Happiness Index (SHI; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005) as a measure of happiness as well as the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977) to measure depressive symptoms from the previous week (Mongrain & Anselmo-Matthews, 2012). The researchers used the positive psychology exercises early memories, early positive memories, three good things, and using signature strengths in a new way. Mongrain and Anselmo-Mathews (2012) found the most effective exercises were the early positive memories, with significant increases after

one month of ($p < .001$, $d = .27$) three good things, ($p = .004$, $d = .15$), and using signature strengths in a new way ($p < .001$, $d = .29$). Participants also experienced a decrease in depressive symptoms ($F(4, 348) = 4.57$, $p = .001$, $\eta p2 = .050$).

Meta-analyses conducted by Sin and Lyubomirsky (2009) indicated that positive psychology interventions help to enhance well-being and alleviate depressive symptoms. According to the meta-analysis, positive psychology interventions were shown to significantly enhance well-being and reduce depressive symptoms as a result of 49 studies and 25 combined studies, which yielded mean ($r = .29$) for WB, mean ($r = .3$) for depression (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009, p. 484). Rehabilitative counselor student coursework has used positive psychology to prepare students for future work with clients, as well as enhancing the counselor's character strengths as a professional (Chapin & Boykin, 2010). Coursework involved a positive introduction, which began with a you at your best exercise, filling one's bucket with positive experiences based on character strengths, positive experiences in coursework, three good things exercises, gratitude letter and visit, and utilization of the Values in Action-Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004). In a meta-analysis of 51 studies on patients with mental disorders, Schrank, Brownell, Tylee, and Slade (2014) found that PPT was an effective intervention in reducing depressive symptoms.

<div align="center">Research in Academic Settings</div>

Research on PPT in academic settings has involved the following student exercises: writing gratitude letters, journaling about three things that went well every day, engaging in the school environment, enjoying in the school environment, achieving in the school

environment, and using signature strengths in a new way (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009, p. 301). Costello and Stone (2012) have studied the effects of using positive psychology with students who have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities (LD) and found that the value of academic coaching using the constructs of self-reflection of strengths and self-efficacy, carries from semester to semester. Pajares (2001) has conducted research to determine the correlation of student traits such as optimism, authenticity, self-acceptance in regards to inviting to one-self, and acceptance of others in regard to inviting to others, with academic achievement. Using standardized ratings with a population of 529 middle school students, task orientation was correlated with optimism ($r = .399$) with being inviting to oneself ($r = .433$) and inviting to others ($r = .431$)(p. 31). Those students who are task-oriented, view the challenge of school as enjoyable, and are intrinsically motivated, hold themselves in higher self-esteem, self-worth, and self-efficacy.

Nagata, Conoley, Anadottir, White, and Shishim (2011) used the positive psychology interventions three good things, using signature strengths, and the gratitude visit, to determine if these interventions would increase happiness, decrease depression, increase campus involvement, increase civic engagement, and increase GPA with first year college students. Civic engagement and responsibility were measured by how much damage occurred in the resident dorm at the end of the year. A sample of 240 students from a university residence hall was the experimental group. Measurements were taken during the fall, winter, and spring term using a chi-square, 2 x 3 mixed model ANOVA. According to the researchers, depression did not prove significant. ($F(1, 51) = .213$, $p = .65$, eta-square

= .004, observed power = .074) The Pearson correlation was not significant (pre-test

measure: $r = -.065, p = .38, n = 188$; T1: $r = -.012, p = .91, n = 93$; T2: $r = -.11, p = .25$,

$n = 116$). Academic achievement did not show significance $(F(1, 83) = .550, p = .46)$.

Citizenship was partially confirmed (chi-square = 30.53, $p < .001$). However, well-being

and campus involvement were confirmed. Well-being was significant ($F(1, 69) = 3.83, p =$

.05, eta-square = .053, observed power = .488). The Pearson correlation proved significant

at Term 1 ($r = .29, p = .005, n = 93$) and at Term 2 ($r = .18, p = .05, n = 116$). Campus

involvement measured as the following: (T2: chi-square = 10.99, $p < .01, f = -.29$; T3: chi-

square = 15.09, $p < .01, f = -.31$; T4: chi-square = 11.73, p < .01, $f =. 33$)(Nagata, Conoley,

Anadottir, White, & Shishim, 2011, p. 2) As noted by the researchers, the implications for

this study were that students who practiced the interventions at least once a week reported

higher well-being, greater campus involvement, and greater civic responsibility, which is of

interest to college administrators and student affairs. Similar studies found traditional

college students who were high in the positive psychology constructs of altruism, gratitude,

and happiness correlated with volunteerism (Whitney & Micheletto, 2009). Thus, there is a

fair amount of empirical support for interventions that use positive psychology to enhance

student well-being and engagement in academic life.

Research has been conducted regarding the use of positive psychology as a

curriculum in traditional undergraduate courses in civics, psychology, and graduate courses

in clinical and counseling psychology (Allen, 2011; Rogatko, 2009; Seligman, Ernst,

Gillman, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009; Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Reivich,

Seligman, and McBride (2011) have used positive psychological constructs and exercises in conducting resiliency training in the US Army.

<div align="center">Positive Psychology Research of Traditional Undergraduate Populations</div>

Psychological research has largely involved traditional undergraduate students, whose age range is between the ages of 18-21, and who are taking psychology courses (Grohol, 2010). Jones, You, and Furlong (2013) conducted research regarding traditional college students ranging from 18-25 and the covitality, meaning the simultaneous presence of, six positive psychological constructs measuring for hope, optimism, self-efficacy, life satisfaction, happiness, and gratitude. Their research indicated that self-efficacy and optimism were essential in college students attaining their goals and college degrees. Schriffrin's (2014) research involved the correlation of positive psychological constructs and attachment in traditional college students. Macaskill and Denovan (2013) have researched first-year college students, positive psychology constructs, and the ability to develop autonomous learning skills in traditional college student populations. Stevic and Ward (2008) conducted a study, which measured the correlation between traditional college students' self-reports of positive recognition, life satisfaction, and personal growth initiative. Their study concluded that those students who received more positive compliments and recognition for their successes in college experienced better life satisfaction and the ability to accomplish their collegiate goals and future aspirations. Sparkman, Maulding, and Roberts (2012) found that traditional students who exhibited characteristics of emotional intelligence (EQ) in the aspects of social responsibility, flexibility, and impulse control were more likely to complete their college degrees.

In a study conducted in South Africa, researchers hypothesized that positive psychology interventions would increase overall happiness and assist in goal attainment with traditional college students in their third year of an industrial/organizational psychology degree program. This study involved an ($n = 20$) out of 109 students who were enrolled in this I/O psychology program. Students engaged in small group interventions and individual coaching sessions over an 8-month period of time. The study showed significance in the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985) pre-post tests ($z = -3.77$; $p < .01$), pre-post post tests ($z = -3.41$; $p < .01$), and post post-post tests ($z = -3.33$; $p < .01$) Regarding Meaning, significance was shown in pre-post test ($z = -2.63$; $p < .01$) and pre-post-post test ($z = -3.25$; $p < .01$), with no significance in post post-post test ($z = -1.62$; $p = 0.10$) (Van Zyl & Rothmann, 2012). Although positive psychology interventions were used in this study, the sample size was not large enough to be generalizable. Further study should involve larger sample sizes as well as more random sampling.

Therefore, much positive psychology research has been conducted with the traditional college student in academic settings. A gap in the literature existed involving research with the nontraditional student. The purpose of this study was to investigate and evaluate the use of positive psychology constructs with nontraditional students in assisting with the attainment of goals, course retention, and completion of studies, as well as the impact of overall subjective well-being.

Problem Statement

There is little research on the impact of introducing positive psychology constructs into a foundational course among nontraditional students. If students were engaged in the curriculum, then there would be positive outcomes in terms of retention, as well as other long- and short-term effects. In order to address this gap in the literature, research in the area of positive psychology could help determine what interventions could help students' academic success in order to reduce attrition. Statistically, only 47% of all college students will graduate within 5 years (Barefoot, 2004). According to Exposito and Bernheimer (2012), the Public Policy Institute of California reported that of those students enrolled in community colleges from 1997-2003, less than one-tenth finished their associate's degrees, one-fourth continued on to four-year colleges, and one-third did not return after the first year of college (Sengupta & Jensen, 2006; Exposito & Benheimer, 2012).

Nontraditional students are defined as students of color and first-generation college students, which often entails students from collectivistic cultures (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012; Sosik & Jung, 2002; Triandis, Bontempo, & Villareal, 1988). Collectivistic cultures, as opposed to individualistic cultures, place an emphasis on extended family and community goals over individualistic pursuits (Triandis, 2001). Family and cultural ties are what help these students navigate new territory. When these nontraditional students encounter the college campus, social networks are often not in place, and the nontraditional student may feel alienated. In order for these students to be successful in this environment, social networks must be put in place on the college campus. Faculty support is critical in nontraditional college students' success. Without this, students will leave their collegiate institutions (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012). Tanaguchi and Kaufman (2005) reported that

given the time constrictions of nontraditional students, and the inability to stay after class or create a social network outside of class, this has a detrimental effect on students being able to make those necessary connections when issues arise regarding class work. Thus, research on nontraditional students that emphasizes academic attitudes and outcomes can help to fill the evidence gap and inform interventions that support educational attainment and retention. To address this gap, positive psychology research could inform interventions to support students in completing their studies and reduce attrition. A key component of this research study was to help nontraditional students create an academic, social, or personal goal in order to achieve academic success, complete their studies, increase retention, and improve overall well-being.

Fike and Fike (2008) stated that student retention is important for the sustainability of the academic institution, but more importantly, to ensure that the student has a positive academic experience and achieves his/her college and career goals and general overall well-being. They also stated that academic institutions place their resources in recruitment, but fail in the areas of retention. Alarcon and Edwards' (2013) research indicated in addition to ability, such as reading, writing, and mathematical skills, students' motivation, particularly in the area of conscientiousness and positive affect, are predictors of student retention and academic success in college. Daley (2010) stated that students lack self-knowledge, do not understand why they are in college, and cannot create nor pursue self-directed goals. Therefore, they drop out. Students who do not experience self-efficacy in college are more likely to drop out (Horn, 1996; Spellman, 2007). However, if students recognize their positive human strengths and virtues and applied these to their academic,

social, and personal goals, they would experience greater success in realizing their college, personal, career, and professional goals.

The goal of this study was to evaluate the short-term outcomes of introducing a positive psychology curriculum into a foundational course at a private career college. Students set academic, social, and personal goals at the outset of the 9-week course. At the end of the course, success in achieving these goals was assessed, as were changes in student well-being before and after the curriculum. It was hypothesized that students would improve on measures of well-being over the duration of the course and would report a high rate of attainment of academic, social, and personal goals. What was addressed in the gap in the literature was to determine if teaching positive psychology constructs in foundational courses, as a part of foundational coursework in a career college, helped students achieve academic, social, or personal goals in their college courses.

Gap in Literature

Few research studies have been conducted regarding positive psychology constructs and the nontraditional student. Nontraditional students are defined as those students who are 25 years of age and above, did not follow an uninterrupted, linear path from high school to college, have returned to school after having established jobs and families, and are often nonresidential to the campus. Research regarding nontraditional students has involved work/family/school balance, remediation, motivation, and retention (Horn, 1996; Jenkins, 2009; Wyatt, 2011). Nontraditional learners have time constraints due to full-time jobs, spouses, and families. Due to the fact that college is an additional commitment of time and

resources to the already ever-present demands of family and job, nontraditional students tend to be more committed to their studies and are more successful with the completion of homework and class assignments, participating in class, and engaging with their instructors (Hoyert & O'Dell, 2009).

Bye, Pushkar, and Conway (2007) conducted research measuring intrinsic and extrinsic motivation of both traditional and nontraditional students. Intrinsic motivation is more highly associated with life-long learning because one is curious, is deeply interested in the subject matter, and a sense of mastery is accomplished as a result of knowledge acquisition. These qualities are also components of *flow* (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). Extrinsic motivation is associated with external rewards such as grades, recognition, and competition. Surveys regarding motivation and affect were handed out to a random sample of ($n = 300$) students who were traditional (21 and younger) and nontraditional (28 and older) in a Midwestern Canadian university. Other factors included full and part-time work, as well as full or part-time enrollment in school. Nontraditional students measured higher mean scores for intrinsic motivation ($M = 5.59$, $SD = 0.13$) than traditional students ($M = 5.10$, $SD = .10$) with a moderate interaction of Cohen's ($d = .25$). The researchers concluded that nontraditional students were motivated more by learning for learning's sake, and traditional students were motivated more by completion of studies toward a specific end. It is important for the nontraditional student to experience intrinsic satisfaction from the college experience in order for it to be meaningful. Intrinsic motivation was also correlated with higher GPAs. Nontraditional students are more engaged regarding their interaction with the material, as well as their professors, but cannot be as committed

outside the walls of the classroom due to family and work constraints. In order for the nontraditional student to be committed to the completion of his/her studies, the college experience must entail positive interactions and relationships within the classroom walls, as well as relevance to an individual's internal, intrinsic motivations. The attainment of a social goal had a positive impact on the nontraditional student's ability to feel a part of the academic community and increase retention. Goal attainment through the use of positive psychology constructs was a key component in this research study.

<u>Challenges Faced by Nontraditional Students</u>

Given the external demands of the nontraditional student, retention and degree completion are of concern. Nontraditional students are more likely to take five or more years to complete their degrees and are more likely to abandon the pursuit within the first year (Shillingford & Karlin, 2013). In order to assist nontraditional students in the completion of their goals, colleges and universities must understand what motivates nontraditional students and must learn how to create an academic and social environment that helps them maintain and meet those goals. Nontraditional students are more likely to be intrinsically motivated in that their pursuance of a college degree is to gain knowledge, be involved in the enjoyment of learning, and to gain competence and mastery in their field of study. Intrinsic motivation involves enjoyment, challenge, mastery, and flow. Nontraditional students are also extrinsically motivated in that economic and financial security demand and warrant a college degree. Therefore, in order to aid and assist the nontraditional student toward the completion of his/her studies, researchers must investigate the role that intrinsic motivation plays in helping students concerning retention

and completion of their studies. The setting and achievement of a personal goal was integral to the intrinsic motivation of the nontraditional student regarding the completion of his/her studies.

In a study conducted by Shillingford and Karlan (2013), 35 nontraditional students, age 25-49, 6 male and 29 females, answered 28 questions from the Academic Motivation Scale (AMS; Vallerand et al. 1992) in order to determine intrinsic motivation, extrinsic motivation, and amotivation in their decision to attend college (p. 98). The results of the questionnaire indicated that more items endorsed intrinsic motivation (need to know, accomplishment, and to experience stimulation) ($M = 52.94$, $SD = 11.48$) as opposed to extrinsic motivation (identified, introjection, external regulation) *($M = 36.48$, $SD = 9.05$)* and amotivation (neither intrinsically or extrinsically motivated) ($M = 4.57$, $SD = 1.84$) (p. 98). The researchers concluded that in order to aid in retention of the nontraditional student, their intrinsic, as well as extrinsic goals, must be met and satisfied, and this may be accomplished through curriculum and programs of study. Additionally, colleges and universities must understand the differences and needs of the nontraditional and traditional student.

Regarding the nontraditional student, campus engagement is limited and connection to college extracurricular activities is lacking. Campus involvement is key to the retention and sense of belonging for all students. Wyatt (2011) cited a survey conducted by the Indiana University Center for Post-secondary Research (CPR) in 2006, stating nontraditional student participation and volunteerism was significantly lower than that of the traditional student (p. 14). Forty-seven percent of nontraditional students were involved

in volunteering as opposed to 69% of traditional students. Only 12% of nontraditional students were involved in research with a faculty member as opposed to 23% for traditional students. Of those students involved in extracurricular activities, only 27% of nontraditional students participated, as opposed to 69% of traditional students. Given that nontraditional students often attend college part-time, have part-time or full-time jobs, have spouses and/or children, and are nonresidential to campus, these statistics concur with the data concerning campus involvement. The researchers who conducted the meta-analysis suggested that student retention might increase with student engagement on college campuses. Pursuance of a social goal was a key component of this research study.

Nontraditional female students encounter additional challenges regarding retention and goal attainment in colleges and universities. For many, the transition from employment, and oftentimes motherhood, to student, requires a huge shift in life as well as personal identity. A clearly defined self-concept and high self-esteem are necessary to successfully navigate this new collegiate territory. Nontraditional female students may not be able to relate to nontraditional males, nor traditional males and females, and thus feel alienated from the campus community (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). Women who are divorced with children are less likely to graduate than married women as a result of less support at home and financial concerns (Tanaguchi & Kaufman, 2005). Campus involvement and full integration are necessary to keep the nontraditional student from dropping out when academic demands may become overwhelming. Social and childcare supports have been shown to alleviate these types of stressors, and effective, proficient campuses recognize and provide these campus community resources.

In order to study the internal and external factors, which affect the well-being of the nontraditional female, specifically in the areas of attachment and self efficacy, Quimby and O'Brien (2006) drew from a sample of 209 nontraditional female students with one or more child(ren) who were enrolled part-time or full-time from a Midwestern university in the United States whose age ranged from 26-53 years ($M = 36.1$, $SD = 6.0$) (p. 452). Surveys and scales that were administered were the "Confidence (in self and others) subscale from the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994); the Social Provisions Scale (SPS; Cutrona & Russell, 1987); Two scales from the Self-Efficacy Expectations for Role Management measure (SEERM; Lefcourt, 1995; Lefcourt & Harmon, 1993); the Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI; Derogatis & Spencer, 1982) Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale (RSE; Rosenberg, 1965), and the Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larson, & Griffin, 1985)" (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006, pp. 453-454). The research study reported that those nontraditional females who reported as securely attached, had supportive relationships, effective parenting skills, and high self-esteem correlated with healthy psychological well-being (Quimby & O'Brien, 2006). The implications of this study were that campuses and universities must provide counseling for those students who are insecurely attached, support in childcare services while in school, stress management classes regarding multiple roles as mother and student, and workshops to improve self-efficacy and self-esteem in the college environment. Therefore, a possible social goal might involve the nontraditional student networking and seeking out resources that the campus provides such as counseling, daycare, and study groups.

Purpose of Study

This study used mixed methods to determine whether teaching positive psychology constructs in a foundational class of nontraditional adult learners in a career college would have a positive impact on students, such as increasing well-being and attaining academic, social, and personal goals. Qualitative research methods were used to analyze students' work on in-class and homework assignments and content analyses of student-written reflections, which identified emerging, recurrent themes. Quantitative analysis entailed pre-course and post-course surveys and scales determined if there were significant improvements over the course of the 9-week term on measures of authentic happiness and life satisfaction. Additionally, a post-course Likert-type scale measured students' self-measurement as to what extent they achieved their self-determined academic, social, and personal goal (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011). Qualitative and quantitative data were integrated in order to provide a convergent perspective on the impact of the positive psychology curriculum on nontraditional students enrolled in a career college. Qualitative data were used to help interpret quantitative findings, and vice-versa (Sullivan, 2002; Tashakkhori & Teddlie, 2003).

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The primary research questions for this study were:

Quantitative

RQ1:   Is the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum (independent variable) in a foundational class of nontraditional students associated with attainment of academic, social, or personal goals (dependent variable)?

H^1_0: A majority of students will not report goal attainment.

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is not associated with the attainment of goals.

H^1_A: A majority of students will report goal attainment.

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is associated with the attainment of goals.

RQ2:   Is the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being?

H^2_0: $\mu_1 - \mu_2 = 0$

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is not associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being.

H^2_A: $\mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being.

<u>Qualitative</u>

Guiding Questions

1. Do students report positive social and learning experiences with the course, as evidenced by qualitative analysis of journals, reflections, and written class assignments?

2. What lessons can be learned from the implementation of a positive

   psychology curriculum in a foundational course among nontraditional

   students that can inform future interventions?

Theoretical Foundation and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework for this research study involved building on the positive

psychological theories of Seligman, Peterson, Csikszentmihalyi, Lyubomirsky, and

Fredrickson. Seligman (2011) stated that well-being is a construct, which consists of

positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). An

individual must use his/her human character strengths and virtues to optimize each of these

constructs. Positive emotion involves how happy an individual is and the willingness to

maintain this emotion through engagement in life. Engagement involves optimism,

resilience, and pursuing interests with zest and vitality. Meaning entails an individual's

purpose in life. Purpose can involve an individual's livelihood, caretaking of another

human being, spirituality, and self-actualization. Accomplishment is different from success.

Accomplishment takes grit and involves intrinsic motivators that go beyond money, fame,

or power (Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman, 2011). Accomplishment is what Pink (2009)

describes as mastery, autonomy, and purpose.

Peterson (2004, 2006) theorized that human character strengths and virtues are at

the core of psychologically healthy individuals. These include: wisdom (creativity,

curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective); courage (bravery, persistence,

industriousness, integrity, authenticity, honesty, vitality, zest, enthusiasm); humanity (love,

kindness, generosity, nurturance, social intelligence (emotional, personal); justice

(citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork, fairness, leadership); temperance (forgiveness, mercy, humility, modesty, prudence, self-regulation); and transcendence (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, optimism, humor, and spirituality)(pp. 35-39). Individuals operate utilizing these virtues in their daily encounters and activities in life. All human beings have these character strengths and virtues, and some are stronger than others. The Values in Action--Inventory of Strengths VIA-IS (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004) is a measurement device which categorizes the 24 Human Character Strengths and Virtues, starting with the top five an individual expresses and uses the most and then delineates the final six to twenty-four in order of importance as determined and evidenced by the individual taking the survey.

Csikszentmihalyi created the theory of *flow* (1990, 1996). When an individual is in a state of flow, s/he is operating in a state of total engagement, whether it is skiing down a mountain slope, performing brain surgery, playing a difficult piece of music, creating an abstract painting, preparing an incredible meal, or enjoying time with her/his best friend. Flow can involve any endeavor where an individual must attain mastery or be totally engaged in an activity that requires high skill and high concentration. This can be in a career, in the arts, or a specialized hobby. According to Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 2004), it takes about 10 years to become a master. An individual who is in flow loses track of time. The task at hand is challenging, yet not too difficult to accomplish. The individual is experiencing total enjoyment and pleasure while performing the task and is experiencing her/his full optimal self. The individual is in a state of ecstasy. Often s/he is engaged in a creative endeavor in which the intrinsic reward of being involved in the activity is reward

in and of itself. It does not require any extrinsic motivator. To be in a state of flow is to be experiencing the highest level of happiness.

Sonja Lyubomirsky (2007) theorized that an individual's life happiness involves the following: expressing gratitude, cultivating optimism, avoiding over-thinking, rumination, and social comparison, practicing acts of kindness, nurturing social relationships, developing coping strategies for stress, learning to forgive, increasing flow experiences, nurturing relationships, taking care of one's body and mind, practicing spirituality, savoring life's moments of pleasure, and committing to goals. According to her research, happiness is not determined by fame and fortune, nor is it a hedonic pursuit of pleasure (Lyubomirsky, 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2001). Happiness requires intentional behavior and self-discipline.

Barbara Fredrickson's (2009) contribution to the theory of positive psychology involves the concept of broaden-and-build. Positive emotion broadens an individual's concept of him/herself and opens awareness and possibility for more creativity and receptivity to even more positive experiences (p. 21). This then builds on more opportunities as the person attracts more relationships, more connections, and more resources. Negativity and negative emotions constrict, restrict, and narrow these possibilities. Positivity activities involve open-mindedness, kindness, high quality connections, applying strengths, engaging in nature, meditation, gratitude, savoring positivity, and visualizing an individual's future by setting goals (Fredrickson, 2009).

Research conducted by Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, and Conway (2009) involved testing the theory of broaden-and-build using daily diary entries to examine

evidence of positive emotion, ego resilience, and global life satisfaction. University

students age 18 and older within the first two years of their collegiate studies were chosen

for the study via a newspaper ad. Participants were native English speakers and scored less

than 24 on the Center for Epidemiological Depression Scale (CES-D; Radloff, 1977). Of

the 559 applicants, 120 were eligible, and 80% qualified leaving 86 participants who

recorded in their diaries 21 out of 28 days. The students submitted daily emotion reports

via the researchers' university website utilizing the Differential Emotions Scale (mDES;

Fredrickson et al., 2003) and the Dispositional Positive Emotions Scale-Compassion Scale

(Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003). The Positive Emotions subscale which

measures for amusement, awe, compassion, contentment, gratitude, hope, interest, joy,

love, and pride (α = .86); and the Negative Emotions subscale which measures for anger,

contempt, disgust, embarrassment, fear, guilt, sadness, and shame (alpha = .82) were

administered. The hypotheses for this study were as follows: "Hypothesis 1: Do Positive

(but not Negative) Emotions Predict Increases in Ego Resilience and Life Satisfaction?;

Hypothesis 2: Do Positive Emotions (but not Life Satisfaction) Partially Mediate the

Relation Between Initial and Final Ego Resilience Scores?; Hypothesis 3: Are Increases in

Ego Resilience Responsible for the Relation Between Positive Emotions and Increased Life

Satisfaction?; Hypothesis 4: Do Negative Emotions Reduce the Effects of Positive

Emotions?; Hypothesis 5: Are Rising Levels of Positive Emotions Necessary?" (Cohn,

Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, and Conway, 2009, pp. 363-365). The results indicated that

positive emotions predict ego resilience and life satisfaction with positive emotion ($M =$

1.95, $SD = 0.51$, negative $M = 0.63$, $SD = 0.38$) regarding Hypothesis 1 (p. 363). Positive

emotions predict ego resilience (ß = .22, *p* = .001) for T2 and (ß = .074, *p* < .001) for T1

regarding Hypothesis 2 (p. 364). For Hypothesis 3, "Positive emotions predicted change in

life satisfaction (ß = .15, *p* = .03)" (Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, and Conway, 2009,

p. 364). The researchers stated, regarding Hypothesis 4, that negative emotions were a

significant negative predictor in reducing positive emotion (ß = - .17, *p* = .01), but

insignificant regarding ego resilience and life satisfaction between T1 and T2

(ß = .10, *p* = .10) (p. 364). "Positive emotions remained a significant predictor of change in

resilience (ß = 27, *p* < .001)" (Cohn, Fredrickson, Brown, Mikels, and Conway, 2009,

p. 364). Finally, regarding Hypothesis 5, the researchers stated that there was no significant

difference with baseline in regard to ego resilience and life satisfaction with the presence of

positive emotion. However, absolute levels of positive emotion do matter (p. 366).

Therefore, this particular research study indicated a correlation between positive emotions,

ego resilience, and global life satisfaction in that those individuals who exercised positive

emotions have the ability to broaden and build resources.

Most research studies involve 18-21-year old introductory psychology students in

traditional academic settings. For this particular research study, a mixed methods research

design was implemented regarding a nontraditional population in a career college.

Nontraditional students face challenges that traditional college students have yet to

experience such as full-time jobs, spouses, children, and night school after having worked

an 8-12-hour day. Retention is a concern regarding the challenges these students face.

Therefore, for the purposes of this research study, the students created a self-determined

academic, social, or personal goal that they wished to accomplish during their 9-week

foundational course, utilizing positive psychology constructs, as well as their top five character strengths, to achieve their goals, aid in the completion of their studies, and enhance overall well-being.

Allen (2011) conducted research regarding elements of positive psychology in an undergraduate Futures Studies course, which focuses on the impact of societal decisions and the effects on the environment and society to enhance the feelings of self-efficacy in her students' abilities to feel empowered to address global issues through civic engagement. The participants in her qualitative study involved her Futures Studies class, which consisted of 24 students, 22 whom were 21 or 22 years of age, and two students whom were in their early 30s (p. 6). Twenty-one were American citizens, one was Chinese, one was German, and one was Vietnamese (p. 6). The class was equally male and female. The students attended class twice a week for 15 weeks, for 80 minutes. In addition to the text for the course, the students read and completed exercises from Peterson (2006). The students were to create a project dealing with a global issue: water shortages, overpopulation, the digital divide, etc. (Allen, 2011, p. 6). They were also required to take the following surveys and questionnaires from the University of Pennsylvania's Positive Psychology Authentic Happiness website: General Happiness Questionnaire, and the VIA Survey of Character Strengths and the Optimism Test (Seligman, 2004). For the qualitative segment of her study, students wrote reflections based on the assignments from Peterson's text as well as class discussions and the following themes emerged: "a) Is Psychology Positive?; b) Is Positive Psychology a Legitimate Field of Study?; c) Happiness, Pleasure, and Optimism; d) The College Experience; and e) American Life" (Allen, 2011, p. 6).

Additionally, they wrote a mission statement as well as their legacy. Regarding Allen's (2011) reflection on limitations and future research, she felt that one aspect that was missing from the course was for her students to set a personal goal.

At the beginning of the course, Allen (2011) asked her class to participate in a Four Corners activity asking them to stand in a section of the room, responding to the following: "As I learn more about global issues, I: a) feel overwhelmed and depressed; b) feel empowered to act; c) feel apathetic; or d) other" (Allen, 2011, p. 3). In this activity, 18 chose response "a" indicating that the ability to affect change regarding global issues was overwhelming. Allen had hypothesized that by teaching students about positive psychology constructs and assisting them in utilizing their character strengths, they would become more self-efficacious and experience a sense of agency, thus feeling empowered to participate in civic engagement regarding global issues.

Given the exploratory nature of Allen's (2011) study, responses of note involved students conceptualization of what psychology involved, the ability to collect empirical data regarding positive psychology, the merits of realism versus optimism, how to use positive psychology, the realities of college life (stress, unhealthy habits, and academic demands), and the pressures of American life, specifically operating in a competitive capitalistic society which emphasizes production more than happiness.

At the end of the course, students wrote reflective pieces that revealed they felt more positive about the future, desired to enter careers that provided a comfortable living while helping in their local communities, and the importance of spending time with family and significant others and not letting their careers consume them.

Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, and Shore (2010) conducted an experiment, which only dealt with goal-directed behavior. They recruited from a self-selected population of struggling students (GPA below 3.0), whose age ranged from 18-23 years of age ($M = 20.49$ years, $SD = 1.34$). Of the 85 students recruited for the experiment, 60 were women, 56.5 % were European Canadian, 16.5 % were East Asian, and 27.1 % were African, First Nation, Hispanic, and South Asian. Recruitment was conducted through online advertisement, posters, flyers, and class presentations soliciting a willingness to be part of an experiment, which involved goal setting at McGill University in Montreal. The researchers had hypothesized that a one-time goal-setting intervention would increase GPA and student retention rates (p. 257). Students were divided into the experimental intervention and the control. The intervention group took an intensive web-based course on goal setting, which involved eight steps and methods for achieving the goals. This was completed over a 2.5 hour time period, with a five to ten minute break. Students also reflected on what the program meant to them personally. The control group responded to a series of web-based positive psychology questionnaires and wrote reflective responses on past positive experiences as well as neutral topics such as favorite extracurricular activities. GPA, retention rates, and a concluding questionnaire taken at the end of the study 16 weeks later determined measurements. The results yielded "GPA2 ($M = 2.91$, $SD = 0.65$) was significantly higher than the baseline GPA1 ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 0.93$), $t(44) = 4.17$, $p < .01$, $d = 0.65$). In the control group, by contrast, no significant difference emerged between GPA2 ($M = 2.46$, $SD = 1.06$) and GPA1 ($M = 2.26$, SD = 0.72), $t(39) = 1.19$, $p = .28$, $d = 0.17$" (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010, p. 258). Students in the goal-setting

group retained all of the nine credits, while eight students from the control group dropped below nine credits and two dropped out completely. Students in the goal-setting group reported less negative affect *"p(M* = 42.96, *SD* = 16.48) than for the control group (*M* = 34.44, *SD* = 20.66), *t*(83) = 2.11, *p* < .05, *d* = 0.46)"* (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010, p. 259). The researchers stated that there was a correlation between less negative affect and improvement with GPA. Overall, they had determined that goal-setting was key to ensuring that students maintained their full course-load without dropping classes, kept their GPA at or above 3.0, and stabilized positive affect while in school. Compared to the control, which simply answered positive psychology surveys and questionnaires, the goal-setting sample proved to be much more effective concerning course completion, maintaining grades, and positive affect toward school.

For the purposes of the this research, positive psychology curriculum was emphasized in a foundational course to:

1. address the positive aspects of psychologically healthy human beings;

2. encourage the students to set an academic, social, or personal goal during the 9-week course;

3. write reflective journal entries in response to Peterson's (2006) *A primer in positive psychology*;

4. take surveys such as the Authentic Happiness Inventory (Peterson, 2005); the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004); and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985); and

5. write a culminating reflective journal piece on their experience with

    studying and working with positive psychology concepts

The primary purpose of this study was to evaluate the impact of the students'

experiences of taking a foundational course by adding a positive psychology component to

the curriculum to determine if this aided in the students' ability to achieve an academic,

personal, and social goal while utilizing their top five character strengths as determined by

the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS: Seligman & Peterson, 2004). Additionally, the

purpose was to assess the impact of positive psychology curriculum on student well-being,

to provide descriptive data on goal attainment, and qualitative data on student experience

with the curriculum. These mixed methods yielded data that could be used to interpret the

impact of the curriculum and assess specific hypotheses about its effects (Tashakkhori &

Teddlie, 2003).

Addressing Research Questions

The research questions for this dissertation addressed whether the implementation

of positive psychology constructs would positively affect nontraditional career college

students' ability to attain academic, social, and personal goals in order to achieve success in

their college careers, increase retention, and increase reported well-being. This, in turn,

might help students complete their academic studies.

Goncalves and Trunk (2014) conducted a small qualitative study of 10

nontraditional commuter students from a small private school in New Jersey. Participants

were nine females and one male. Ethnicity was not determined in this study. The

participant's age ranged from 27-55 years of age with a mean age of 36 (Goncalves &

Trunk, 2014, p. 165). The term nontraditional student was defined as "being over the age of 25, enrolled full- or part-time, and having family and/or employment obligations in addition to being students" (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014, p. 165). The students were interviewed to determine educational goals, their perceptions of traditional and nontraditional students, their interactions with their professors, their interactions with staff, their accessibility to clubs, organizations, advising, and financial aide counseling. They were also interviewed regarding what they felt their obstacles were to attaining and completing their education. Regarding college completion rates, 38% of nontraditional students drop out their first year as opposed to 16% of traditional students 18-24 years of age.

The results of the interviews indicated that most students had positive interactions with professors and staff. However, students felt alienated on campus and would welcome more social interaction through clubs and organizations specifically targeting the nontraditional student. Nontraditional students could not relate to traditional students due to the life style differences of having jobs, raising children, limited time on campus, and the feeling that younger students did not understand or appreciate the education that they were receiving. Nontraditional students also did not feel represented on the campus they attended in that traditional students' needs are emphasized, even though the nontraditional student is the fastest growing population on college campuses, representing 43% of the population. The researchers determined from the interviews that in order for the nontraditional student to be successful in pursuing his/her academic goals, social interaction in the form of clubs and organizations geared toward the nontraditional student would be necessary in order for

the students to have a sense of belonging and not feel alienated on their campuses. More advising and counseling to assist in course and financial aid information was also warranted. The participants also stated that access to computers and an area for rest and regrouping was necessary to help in the transition from work to school. Goncalves and Trunk (2014) reiterated that there is little research regarding the needs of nontraditional students and their obstacles to success in higher education. For the purposes of this study, the integration of positive psychology as a means to attain academic, social, and personal goals assisted this underrepresented population to achieve academic success in the completion of their studies.

Self-efficacy is key to one's ability to achieve success, follow intrinsic pursuits, and accomplish career aspirations (Bandura, 1982, 2006; Maddux, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sutton, Phillips, Lehnert, Bartle, & Yokomizo, 2011). In a study conducted by Sutton, Phillips, Lehnert, Bartle, and Yokomizo (2011), the researchers sought to determine if character strengths were related to SAT, ACT, and GPA, which is indicative of self-efficacy. Two studies were conducted: one seeking correlations between ACT, SAT, and GPA, and the other measuring for self-efficacy and strengths. The population consisted of 352 women and 176 from a Christian university. "Most were of European decent (468): African American (16) Hispanic/Latino (26) Asian or Pacific Islander (7), and other (11)" (Sutton, Phillips, Lehnert, Bartle, & Yokomizo, 2011, p. 30). Average age for the women was 18.88 with ($SD = .49$). The average age for the men was 19.02 with ($SD = 1.02$). The average student GPA was 3.23 ($SD = .57$). Average SAT score SAT ($M = 1040.20$, $SD = 162.95$) and ACT ($M = 23.23$, $SD = 4.39$) (p. 30). Some of the students had taken the ACT,

but most had taken the SAT, so the researchers chose to convert the ACT scores, with a correlation of ($r = .84$)($p < .001$, two-tailed). The strengths measured for this study were: Relating, Impacting, Thinking, and Striving. Within each of these categories were subcategories. Of those subcategories, the five strengths that most frequently occurred were Belief (182), Adaptability (159), Developer (150), Positivity (135), and Empathy (134) (p. 31).

However, there was little research regarding the utilization of positive psychology and the nontraditional student as a means to help these students recognize their character strengths in order to attain academic, social, and personal goals to aid in the completion of their studies. Due to the demands of the nontraditional student such as full-time jobs, spouse, and family, goal attainment concerning their college degrees is challenging. The nontraditional college student is an underrepresented population in the psychological research, yet this population is the fastest growing among college students. This study was the beginning of addressing and aiding this particular sector of academia.

Nature of the Study

The nature of this study was mixed methods research. Students read Peterson's (2006) *A primer in positive psychology*; responded to exercises from the text; kept a reflective journal; engaged in the course material of a foundational course; took the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004) the Authentic Happiness Survey, (Peterson, 2005); and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin 1985); and set a self-determined academic, social, and personal goal for the term. In the qualitative portion of the study, I pulled out themes that arose from the

students' journals about their experience of taking the foundational course in positive

psychology. I analyzed the professor's journal and debriefed the professor about his/her

experience of teaching positive psychology as a part of the foundational psychology

course.

The quantitative portion involved measuring the students' ability to achieve an

academic, social, or personal goal as a result of identifying and using their character

strengths and studying positive psychology constructs in their foundational course.

Students responded to the following questions using a Likert-type scale (Croasmun &

Ostrom, 2011):

Over the past 9 weeks of this course, to what extent have you accomplished the

academic goal you defined for yourself at the beginning of the course:

    1 = not at all
    2 = not too much
    3 = to some extent
    4 = to a great extent

Over the past 9 weeks of this course, to what extent have you accomplished the

social goal you defined for yourself at the beginning of the course:

    1 = not at all
    2 = not too much
    3 = to some extent
    4 = to a great extent

Over the past 9 weeks of this course, to what extent have you accomplished the

personal goal you defined for yourself at the beginning of the course:

    1 = not at all
    2 = not too much
    3 = to some extent
    4 = to a great extent

Some examples of what were considered an academic goal was earning an "A" in a foundational course; earning a 4.0 GPA for the term; earning an "A" on a major research paper; or seeking out a tutor for a personally difficult course in math or computer applications. Some examples for a social goal were creating a study group, joining a club or organization on campus, initiating a new friendship, creating a professional relationship with a professor, networking with various students in her/his chosen degree program, spending time with family and friends, or asking someone out for coffee. Some examples for a personal goal were to quit smoking, lose weight, exercise, eat a healthier diet, get more sleep, go to a personally satisfying intellectual or spiritual event (i.e.: art museum, church, synagogue, mosque, etc.), or spend time out in nature.

Spellman (2007) asserted that academic, social, cultural, and personal barriers prevent students from finishing their degrees, thus dropping out of college. Alarcon and Edwards (2013) have discovered in their research that ability, motivation, conscientiousness, and positive affectivity are predictors of college retention and eventual graduation. In a study of 584 college freshman from a Midwestern university, the researchers collected information from an online data collection website of students enrolled in an introductory psychology course. Of this sample, 65% were female of which 28.75% were first generation college students (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013, p. 131). The researchers were interested in determining what factors were predictive of university retention. Previous research indicated that ACT scores, gender, and education were reliable predictors that a student would stay in school and not drop out. Additional factors they explored involved ability, motivation (conscientiousness and affectivity), retention, and

parents' education. The researchers used the DTSMA for their logical regression and found the following results: "gender ($\acute{y}$ = .47, p < .05), ACT score ($\acute{y}$ = -.02, p < .05), and conscientiousness ($\acute{y}$ = -.43, p < .01) were significant time-invariant predictors of university dropout; however, parents' education level was not significant ($\acute{y}$ = .03, p > .05)" (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013, p. 133). Next, they tested for positive affectivity PA and negative affectivity NA paired with ACT scores and gender: "gender ($\acute{y}$ = .40, p < .01), ACT test scores (($\acute{y}$ = -.02, p < .05), PA ($\acute{y}$ = -.36, p < .01), and NA ($\acute{y}$ = .21, p < .05) were all significant predictors of university dropout" (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013, p. 133). At this juncture, the parents' education level was no longer significant ($\acute{y}$ = .03, p > .05), nor conscientiousness in the second regression with ($\acute{y}$ = - .19, p >.05) (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013, p. 133). The researchers concluded that this analysis was not a good fit, and allowed the indicators to vary across time and concluded that a student with PA of one standard deviation above the mean was 0.70 less likely to drop out and that a student who had one standard deviation below the mean in NA was 1.23 times higher to drop out (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013, p. 134). The study and utilization of positive psychology constructs may assist students in goal attainment, completion of studies, and retention.

The nontraditional student is one of the fastest growing populations in all levels of post-secondary education from the community college level to graduate school. Discovering ways to aid these individuals in meeting their academic, social, and personal goals is an educational priority of higher educational institutions (Scott & Lewis, 2011). The integration of positive psychology constructs into the nontraditional college classroom may add to the body of research that best serves this population of student.

One of the key objectives of this study was to assess if exposure to a positive psychology curriculum is associated with changes in well-being and attainment of goals over a 9-week course. If a positive psychology curriculum can facilitate well-being and the attainment of personal goals among nontraditional students, then these positive effects may translate into improvements in other life domains. Psychological research regarding students and their learning has typically been conducted with traditional college students whose age range is 18-21 years of age. Through research, addressing the needs of the nontraditional student will add to the body of research as to how to best serve this ever-growing population.

Definitions

Positive Psychology: (1) "The scientific and applied approach to uncovering people's strengths and promoting their positive functioning" (Snyder & Lopez, 2007, p. 3).

(2) "Human goodness and excellence are as authentic as disease, disorder and distress" (Peterson, 2006, p. 5).

Authentic Happiness: Positive emotion, engagement, and meaning (Seligman, 2011, p. 11).

Well-being: "Positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment" (Seligman, 2011, p. 16).

Flow: "A sense of that one's skills are adequate to cope with the challenges at hand in a goal-directed, rule-bound action system that provides clear clues as to how one is performing. Concentration is so intense that there is no attention left over to think about anything irrelevant or to worry about problems. Self-consciousness disappears, and the

sense of time becomes distorted. An activity that produces such experiences is so gratifying that people are willing to do it for its own sake, with little concern for what they will get out of it, even when it is difficult or dangerous" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. 71).

Flourish: "To flourish means to live within an optimal range of human functioning, one that connotes goodness, generativity, growth, and resilience" (Fredrickson & Losada, 2005, p. 678).

Goals: Something one is trying to do or achieve; for the purpose of this research, achieving something in the academic, social, and personal realm.

Nontraditional student: "Nontraditional students are defined as those having any of the following characteristics: (a) those who delayed enrollment into college, (b) part-time students enrolled in less than 12 credits a semester, (c) financially independent students, (d) those who work full-time, defined as more than 35 hours per week, (e) those with dependents other than a spouse, including children or other relatives, (f) single parents, or those responsible for more than 50% of their child's upbringing, and (g) those who did not receive a standard high school diploma" (Horn, 1996, as quoted by Spellman, 2007, p. 65) .

Assumptions

The study was based on the following series of assumptions:

1. Students will answer completely and fully the questions from their in-class and homework assignments truthfully in their journals.

2. Students will answer questions from the Authentic Happiness Survey, the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985),

and the Values in Action VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004) honestly.

3. Students will create an attainable academic, social, and personal goal during the 9-week term.

4. Students will write a reflective piece at the end of the course in their journals.

5. The students will miss no more than four classes in order to remain in the study.

6. The students will complete 80% of the homework and in-class exercises, and 80% of the Seligman and Peterson exercises (i.e.: Gratitude Letter, "Three Things That Went Well/Counting Blessings" Exercise, and 'Random Acts of Kindness" Exercise).

7. The professor will take the Authentic Happiness Survey (2005), the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin 1985), the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004).

8. The professor will keep a reflective journal.

9. The population of 25 students is sufficient for a mixed methods research study involving qualitative data and measurement of changes over time in well-being and attainment of goals.

10. The professor will teach the lessons from Peterson's (2006) *A primer in positive psychology* with fidelity.

11. I will maintain a sample size of 25 students who will attend class, complete the class work and homework, and will complete the course. I will anticipate that

there may be some attrition in the course as students may drop out of the course before it is completed.

12. I will not teach the course.

13. I will curb any biases toward the implementation of positive psychology.

Limitations

The study was subject to the following limitations:

1. A small, selected sample population from a career college may not be generalizable to a larger population.

2. I will be relying on honest, accurate, sufficient responses from the students in their journals in which they respond each week.

3. Attrition due to students dropping out of the course.

4. The population will be comprised of two foundational courses with an (*N* of 25) students. The professor teaching the course will be administering the Authentic Happiness Survey (2005), the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). The professor will make specific selections from Peterson's (2006) *A primer in positive psychology* and not assign every assignment of the text due to time constraints and the professor's need to teach the foundational text as well.

Significance of the Study

This dissertation investigated, through a mixed methods study, the impact of exposure to positive psychology constructs in a foundational class of nontraditional adult learners in a career college on self-reported goal attainment and well-being.

Foundational research conducted by Allen (2011) at Drury University required students to read Peterson's (2006) *A primer in positive psychology,* hold discussions in class, and keep journals. Qualitative and quantitative methods were used (Campbell & Stanley, 1963, 1966). For the purposes of this dissertation, qualitative and quantitative approaches were used in order to assess the experience of students with the curriculum in terms of setting and attaining goals, and other positive reported effects, such as increase in authentic happiness, life satisfaction, recognition of personal character strengths, and other emergent themes in the qualitative data collected and analyzed from journals, reflections, homework assignments, and pre/post inventories.

The professor wrote a reflection regarding what her personal challenges were in teaching the curriculum; what were the positive aspects; what were the negative aspects; what exercises seemed most productive in teaching positive psychology constructs and seemed to have the most impact in attaining goals; and what could be improved as a teaching methodology when instructing students in positive psychology constructs. The professor was debriefed for any insights and feedback on what worked well and what needs improvement in the implementation of the course. This will be informative for future research and design of a foundational course with positive psychology as an emphasis.

The students learned the various aspects of positive psychology from not only reading Peterson's text, but also experiential exercises such as self-assessment surveys

found at the University of Pennsylvania's Authentic Happiness website; exercises at the

end of the chapters from Peterson's (2006) *A primer in positive psychology*; gratitude

letters; nightly/weekly journal entries of listing three things that went well during the day;

random acts of kindness exercises; and assessing and utilizing their character strengths to

accomplish an academic, personal, and/or social goal. The students took the following

surveys: The Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson,

2004), The Authentic Happiness Inventory (2005), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale

(SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin 1985). Additionally, they set an academic,

social, and/or personal goal during the 9-week course. The researcher provided the

professor in the foundational psychology class with lessons to augment the foundational

course by having the students read and journal about Peterson's (2006) *A primer in positive*

psychology, set a personal goal for the term, and take Peterson's and Seligman's VIA

Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004), Peterson's Authentic

Happiness Inventory (2005), and Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin's Satisfaction with

Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) at the website:

http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/.

   The purpose of taking the Authentic Happiness Inventory (2005) was to create a

baseline to determine if the inventory and scale change after engaging in the 9-week term

with an emphasis in positive psychology. Sample questions from the Authentic Happiness

Inventory (2005) involve:

   My life does not have any purpose or meaning.

   I feel cut off from other people.

I have little or no enthusiasm.

The purpose of taking the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was to create a baseline to determine if overall life satisfaction changed after engaging in the 9-week term focused on positive psychology. Sample questions from the Satisfaction in Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin 1985) involve:

In most ways, my life is close to my ideal.

I am satisfied with my life.

If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.

The purpose of the students taking the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004) was to help the students identify their top five character strengths and to serve as an intervention in order to use these strengths in accomplishing their academic, social, and/or personal goals during the 9-week term. This survey asks 240 questions that help the individual to identify his/her character strengths. The top five are listed, and then rank ordered to 24. These were then used as a springboard in aiding the students in utilizing their character strengths to achieve their goals (Seligman & Peterson, 2004). Sample questions are as follows:

I never quit a task before it is done.

I am never too busy to help a friend.

I always let bygones be bygones.

It is important to me that I live in a world of beauty.

I find the world a very interesting place.

This particular study filled a gap in the literature in that there was little evidence that teaching positive psychology had qualitative and quantitative measurable outcomes in accomplishing academic, social, and/or personal goals in the lives of nontraditional students who take foundational courses in a career college. Allen's (2011) work involved a civics course of traditional college students, and she felt that one of the limitations of her study was not having her students create a personal goal. The students did, however, feel more empowered to address global world issues after participating in a course that incorporated positive psychology, as well as character strengths, as was noted in their post-course reflective evaluation. Students commented in their reflective journals that they wanted to maintain close ties with family, friends, and significant others while maintaining balance in their chosen careers and fields of study. They mentioned the tension of living virtuous lives while navigating in a capitalistic society and creating a good standard of living for themselves (Allen, 2011).

I proposed to investigate if placing a more intensive focus on positive psychology, as a part of a foundational course in a career college of nontraditional students, would aid in the students' ability to create and accomplish academic, social, and/or personal goals and use this as a springboard for future goal-setting in their college careers. Research in the area of positive psychology must address how the use of signature strengths helps individuals attain their goals and increase well-being.

Linley, Nielsen, Gillet, Wood, and Biswas-Diener (2011) stated that self-concordant goals, those goals that involve an individual's values and interests, are more likely to be sustained and achieved. In order for individuals to understand and use their interests and

values, positive psychologists administer the VIA-IS (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004)

to assist in the self-discovery of these positive psychological aspects. In a study of 240

college students, in their second year in the Midlands of England, which comprised 49

males and 191 females with a mean age of 19.95 years, (SD = 2.54 years), primarily white

(78.8%) or Indian (8.8%) and marital status was largely single/unmarried (91.7%) were

administered surveys and asked to name their three top goals for the semester (Linley,

Nielson, Gillett, Wood, & Biswas-Diener, 2011, p. 8). The surveys used were administered

at baseline and at the end of the 10-week semester. The surveys were: "VIA Inventory of

Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004); Positive and Negative Affect Scales;

(PANAS; Watson, Tellegen, & Clark, 1988); Satisfaction With Life Scale (SWLS; Diener,

Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985); and Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction Scales

(BPNSS: Deci & Ryan, 2000). In order to measure how much the students were using their

signature strengths in life in general, they we asked "*How much have you used our*

signature strengths in your life so far this semester?" (Linley, Nielson, Gillett, Wood, &

Biswas-Diener, 2011, p. 10). They were scored 0 for (not at all) to 4 for (very much). To

measure how much the students were using their signature strengths to attain their top three

goals, they were asked, *"How much have you used your signature strengths in working*

towards the first [second, third] goal you identified this semester?" (Linley, Nielson,

Gillett, Wood, & Biswas-Diener, 2011, p. 10). Again, scored 0 for (not at all) to 4 for (very

much). Since each goal was particular to the student, a composite score was used in the

analysis. Results showed "to load .76 to .84 in a single component, eigenvalue = 1.95

explaining 65.05% of the variance between Time 1, and to load .80 to .86 on a single

component, eigenvalue = 2.08 explaining 69.37% of the variance Time 2" (Linley, Nielson, Gillett, Wood, & Biswas-Diener, 2011, pp. 10-11). The principle components for the PANAS measured "-.72 to .76 on a single component, eigenvalue = 1.66 which explained 53.33% of the variance" (Linley, Nielson, Gillett, Wood, & Biswas-Diener, 2011, p. 11). The researchers concluded that strengths use was associated with need satisfaction and well-being. When individuals pursue personally relevant goals, utilizing their signature strengths, they are better able to reach goal attainment, well- being, and life satisfaction, thus feeling more positive than negative about their lives (Linley, Nielson, Gillett, Wood, & Biswas-Diener, 2011).

The study aforementioned involved traditional college age students. I investigated if the application of positive psychology constructs, classroom assignments and homework, self-awareness and discovery of an individual's human character strengths and virtues, and the creation of a personal academic, social, and/or personal goal increased overall well-being, satisfaction with life, and goal attainment, thereby aiding in completion of studies and retention in college regarding nontraditional career college students. If I found that the purposeful study of positive psychology aids students' abilities to achieve academic, social, and/or personal goals, then these pedagogical methods and practices can be repeated in other foundational courses, and possibly increase retention.

Positive psychology has been practiced and studied in various other level courses as demonstrated by: Guse (2010); Pawelski (2007); Rogatko (2009); and Seligman (2009). Qualitative studies involved journal reflections in which students receiving masters' degrees in counseling felt that they had had a much more fulfilling experience in studying

psychology as mental health care professionals because the course did not involve dysfunction alone. They also felt they had learned tools that they could use in their own lives and practices to help their future clients. It was my aspiration to investigate if positive psychology constructs taught in an academic setting could aid students in achieving academic, social, and/or personal goals, thereby aiding in completion of studies and possibly helping to maintain retention concerning nontraditional college populations. The context of this study was foundational courses, particularly introductory courses in a career college. By adding positive psychology to college course curricula in foundational courses, this might effect positive social change in students' and teachers' personal college course experiences and set a new course for the study of psychology as a discipline and well as provide a tool for students to experience success in their college careers in psychology or their chosen field of study.

Summary

The study and implementation of positive psychology is still in its nascence. Numerous researchers are exploring its effects in the realms of education, counseling, the military, personal health, happiness, and well-being. This research study indicated that when an individual discovered his/her character strengths, and then applied these character strengths toward the attainment of academic, social and personal goals, this aided in self-efficacy and the completion of studies regarding the nontraditional student's course of study. As a result, this created a positive effect regarding positive social change in career college students' academic and professional experiences.

Mixed methods were utilized to assess changes in student well-being and goal setting quantitatively through pre- and post-tests, as well as identified emergent themes from qualitative analysis of student reflections and written assignments over a 9-week term. Twenty-five students participated in foundational courses, which placed an emphasis on positive psychology. Paired samples *t* tests, Cohen's *d,* thematic analysis, and a researcher-designed Likert-scale assessed changes from the beginning of the course to the end among the quantitative and qualitative measures of overall well-being and goal attainment. Some of the notable findings included significantly positive changes in students' reports of authentic happiness, and a majority of students reporting that they had attained an academic, social, and personal goal over the course of the 9-week curriculum.

Chapter 2 reviewed all of the literature, to date of this dissertation, on positive psychology. New studies occur daily concerning how to use positive psychology in the various disciplines of psychology, academic areas outside of psychology, and nonacademic areas of business, medicine, and the military.

Chapter 3 was an attempt to provide empirical, as well as qualitative evidence, that the implementation of positive psychology in foundational courses, which involve the nontraditional student, could effect positive social change in the lives of students by using character strengths, setting goals, and enhancing overall well-being through positive psychology constructs.

Chapter 4 discussed the results of the findings regarding the implementation of positive psychology exercises, surveys, reflections, and goal setting. The evidence is

promising in that further research could result in enhanced overall well-being and goal accomplishment in the lives of nontraditional students.

Chapter 5 addressed the limitations of this study and future implications for further research. Given that the nontraditional students is the fastest growing population on college campuses today, and retention and completion of studies continues to be a concern in academia, this warrants further study of how to aid students in goal setting and completion of studies as well as enhance well-being while in college and juggling the various responsibilities of job, spouses, and families while in school.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

Positive psychology has its historical roots in the human potential movement of the 1960s and 1970s, involving the work of Carl Rogers and Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1968, 1980; Rogers, 1961, 1969, 1980, 1989). This evolved out of the belief that the discipline of psychology should not only help those in need due to psychological dysfunction, but also to capitalize on individual potential and the ability to enhance well-being. Rogers (1989), in his therapeutic practice, created the concept of unconditional positive regard, therefore assuming that his clients were innately good, decent, human beings who had the means and wherewithal to come up with the solutions to their own inner conflicts and personal growth. He also felt that his clients did not necessarily have to be suffering from psychological dysfunction and neurosis in order to seek therapy. An individual could simply have the inner desire to improve her/his condition concerning happiness, potential growth, and a life well-lived.

Likewise, Maslow (1980) created his theory founded on the hierarchy of needs regarding psychologically healthy, functioning, human beings. These needs entailed: physiological means, safety, love, self-esteem, and self-awareness (Maslow, 1980). Self-awareness, the highest level of the pyramid, involved individuals who are self-actualized. These individuals had a tendency to envelop the following characteristics: Have a clear perception of reality; are open to experience; are integrated as a whole and unified personality; are spontaneous, expressive, and full-functioning; are authentic, autonomous, and unique; are objective; are creative; have the ability to love; are democratic in character structure; have the ability to fuse concreteness and abstractness; and can maintain healthy detachment as well as transcendence of self (Maslow, 1980, pp.172-175).

The next generation of positive psychologists, Martin Seligman, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, Christopher Peterson, Barbara Fredrickson, Sonja Lyubomirsky, Jonathon Haidt, Robert Emmons, and Ed Diener, conducted empirical research studies in order to define, measure, and determine if positive psychology constructs produced change in individuals' lives as evidenced by higher levels of happiness, well-being, and flourishing, as well as reduced symptoms of sadness, depression, and languishing (Seligman, 2011). Therefore, positive psychologists conducted experiments in educational, clinical, medical, military, and business settings.

For the purposes of this research study, positive psychology was applied in a career college of nontraditional students in order to determine if there was measureable evidence that these constructs assist students in attaining academic, social, and personal goals toward the completion of their studies. The nontraditional career college student is an

underrepresented population in psychological research. This study addressed a gap in the literature regarding this sector of academia.

Literature Search Strategy

The following databases were used for the literature search: PsycINFO, ERIC, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycEXTRAS, and SocINDEX with full text. The following keywords were used: *positive psychology, positive psychology interventions, positive psychology therapy, positive psychology in the classroom, well-being, goal attainment, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, traditional student, nontraditional student, career college, community college, self-efficacy, college retention, flow, learned optimism, learned helplessness, authentic happiness, mindfulness meditation, gratitude, optimism, transcendence, depressive realism, broaden-and-build, resilience, individualistic, collectivistic,* and *character strengths*.

The seminal works involved Abraham Maslow (1980) *Toward a psychology of being* (3rd ed.), and Carl Rogers (1969) *Freedom to learn*, Rogers (1980) *A way of being*, and Rogers (1961, 1989) *On becoming a person.* These texts described the foundational work of the human potential movement and humanistic psychology.

The second generation positive psychologists seminal works involved Martin Seligman (1990, 1998) *Learned optimism: How to change your mind and your life,* (2002) *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment,* and (2011) *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being.* These texts culminated into Seligman's theory of PERMA, which is the acronym for Positive emotion, Engagement, Relationship, Meaning, and Accomplishment.

These aspects are what Seligman considered to be the necessary components to live a happy, fulfilling life in which one flourishes, rather than languishing in depression and despair. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) wrote *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience.* The theory of *flow* states that when individuals are involved in an activity that is engaging, challenging, yet accomplishable, and requires a high amount of skill, the individual loses track of time, is experiencing his/her optimal self, and is practicing the most meaningful and purposeful activity in her/his life. Christopher Peterson (2006) *A primer in positive psychology* is a definitive work of what positive psychology is, as well as a textbook in teaching positive psychology courses. Peterson and Seligman (2004) coauthored *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification.* This text defines and describes the 24 character strengths and virtues of psychologically healthy individuals.

Barbara Fredrickson (2009) *Positivity: Top-notch research reveals the 3-to-1 ratio that will change your life* is a compilation of her research regarding positivity, as opposed to negativity, as a means to living a productive, happy, and fulfilling life. Sonja Lyubomirsky (2007) *The how of happiness: A new approach to getting the life that you want* is a culmination of her research regarding an individual's happiness set-point, life circumstances, and the ability to control and create happiness in her/his life.

Empirical research in peer-reviewed journals involved educational, clinical, counseling, medical, military, and business settings in which positive psychology constructs were used to measure its effects. Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson (2005) have created classroom curricula and interventions in the areas of academics and

counseling from elementary schools in Australia and Great Britain, to undergraduate and graduate programs in the United States. Positive psychologist researchers have implemented coursework and counseling programs for adolescents in middle schools regarding academics, as well as building on character strengths and virtues when dealing with psychological issues during young adult development (Froh & Parks, 2013; Huebner, Reschly, & Hall, 2009; Lerner, 2009; Pajares, 2001). Colleges and universities have created coursework in positive psychology, happiness studies, flow, creativity theory, and academic counseling to encourage self-efficacy, graduate completion rates, and life satisfaction during the attainment of bachelor's and master's degrees. Positive psychology has been taught and used as an instrument to train future clinical psychologists and counseling students in graduate school settings (Guse, 2010; Park & Peterson, 2008; Pawelski, 2007). The United States Army commissioned Seligman to assist in resiliency training for American troops in order to aid in combat as well as the re-entry to civilian life at home (Reivich, Seligman, & McBride, 2011; Seligman, 2011).

Concurrently, other positive psychologists were discovering similar character qualities of psychologically healthy human beings in their research. Barbara Fredrickson (2001, 2009), Sonja Lyubomirsky (2007), and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1990) began to formulate their own positive psychology constructs and characteristics.

Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation of this research study involved how the positive psychologists used the various aspects and constructs of positive psychology in natural,

academic, professional, clinical, and medical environments to measure its effects regarding happiness, well-being, and the ability to flourish.

Catalino, Algoe, and Fredrickson (2014) concluded from an experiment in prioritizing positivity that those individuals who seek out and organize positive experiences in their daily lives experience higher levels of well-being. The study involved 233 community-dwelling adults whose age ranges were from 21-65+ years of age (Catalino, Algoe, and Fredrickson, 2014, p. 1156). Their hypotheses were to test if prioritizing positive emotions contributed to better well-being, if explicitly seeking positivity produced more negative emotions, and if positivity produced more positive personal and social resources. Participants were administered the following scales: "Valuing Happiness (Mauss et al., 2011); The modified Differential Emotions Scale (mDES; Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003); The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985); The Center for Epidemiological Studies-Depression (CES-D; Radloff, 1977); The Self-Compassion Scale (Neff, 2003); The Ego-Resilience Scale (Block & Kremen, 1996) and The Carolina Empirically-Derived Mindfulness Inventory (CEDMI; Coffey, Hartman, Fredrickson, 2010). Through a multiple regression analysis, the researchers found that prioritizing happiness was correlated with valuing happiness $r = .25$, $p < .001$" (Catalino, Algoe, and Fredrickson, 2014, p. 1159). However, when an individual focuses intensely on pursuing happiness, a negative effect might result. Regarding the third hypothesis, prioritizing positivity did yield more resources in the areas of "self-compassion, resilience, mindfulness, and positive relations to others ($b = .44$, $b = .22$, $p < .001$)" (Catalino, Algoe, and Fredrickson, 2014, p. 1159). Overall, Catalino, Algoe, and

Fredrickson (2014) concluded that individuals who prioritized positivity as an aspect of their day-to-day experiences experience greater well-being, experience less depressive symptoms, and gain greater resources in the areas of self-compassion and ego-resilience.

Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi (2011) concluded from their studies that individuals engaged in *flow,* which is the ability to involve oneself in an optimally challenging activity that required skill and mastery (neither too difficult nor too easy), was correlated with attentional involvement, intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, and competence valuation (p. 258). Their research involved 86 undergraduate students (56 female, 30 male) attending a small West Coast private college. Students recorded their moment-to-moment activities, using a PDA device (Treo Hand-spring 90) to indicate whether the activity they were involved in was school related (class lecture, out of class assignment, studying for an exam) leisure related (sport, game, hobby) or worked related (non-school) (p. 259). Other recorded activities included "socializing, watching TV, on the phone, sleeping/resting, eating, Internet/e-mail, and other"(Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2011, p. 259). Unlike previous research conducted in this fashion, students were asked competence-relevant questions such as *'How well were you performing?'' ''How challenging was the activity?'' ''Was doing well important to you?''* in order to measure for the balance of challenge and skill. The activities that were not school, leisure, or work-related were skipped by the PDA because they were not considered "competence relevant questions" (p. 259). The students filled out 1,544 surveys and 454 were determined useful for the analysis. Enjoyment, attentional involvement, competence valuation, perceived challenge and perceived skills

were measured through a multilevel regression model. "The datasets indicated that the balance of challenge and skill (BCS) was significant -9.1 x 10^{-5}, *SE* =3.0 x 10^{-5}, *t* = -2.94, *p* < .005, ß = .16. The relationship between BCS and enjoyment was significant 8.1 x 10^{-3}, *SE* = 2.0 x 10^{-4}, *t* = -4.10, *p* < .001, *ß* = .26. The relationship between BCS^2 and attentional involvement was significant -1.1 x 10^{-4}, *SE* = 2.8 x 10^{-5}, *t* = -3.96, *p* < .001, *ß* = .21 and the relationship between competence valuation and attentional involvement was significant, 2.5 x 10^{-2}, *SE* = 2.9 x 10^{-3}, *t* = 8.52, p < .001; *ß* =.43" (Abuhamdeh & Csikszentmihalyi, 2011, pp. 262-263). In summary, what the researchers found was attentional involvement is related to the balance of challenge and skill, and thus brings about more intrinsic motivation because there is enjoyment with being engaged in something that indicates competence evaluation.

These characteristics, strengths, virtues, values, and life practices have similar qualities and features. They not only involve personality traits, but also dictate that individuals make a conscious choice to engage in activities that promote their overall well-being and happiness. Surprisingly, these various positive psychologists also concluded that what an individual thinks ought to contribute to happiness, such as money, attractiveness, fame, status, etc. are not the key components to overall well-being (Haidt, 2006; Lyubomirsky, 2007). For Seligman, this involved positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA) (Seligman, 2011). Daniel Pink (2009) concurred that what actually motivates individuals are mastery, autonomy, and purpose. Diener, Lucas, and Scollon (2006), Ryan and Deci (2001), Haidt (2006) and Lyubomirsky (2007), discussed the concept of hedonic adaptation, which states that

temporary changes in circumstances, whether positive such as winning the lottery, getting married, or acquiring fame, or negative such as paralysis, financial misfortune, or a divorce do not produce lasting affects on an individual's well-being. Human beings eventually adapt and return to a set point regarding their overall happiness. The key to maintaining and advancing an individual's well-being involved a conscious and concerted effort to continuously engage in activities that produce lasting happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2007). These involved: expressing gratitude; cultivating optimism; avoiding over-thinking, rumination, and social comparison; practicing and performing acts of kindness; nurturing relationships; learning and creating coping mechanisms; increasing experiences with flow; cultivating religious and spiritual experiences; pursuing goals; savoring life experiences; and taking care of one's mind and body (Lyubomirsky, 2009; Nolen-Hoeksema & Morrow, 1993).

<center>Positive Psychology in Clinical and Medical Settings</center>

In a clinical study conducted by Brownell, Schrank, Jakaite, Larkin, and Slade, (2015), positive psychology therapy in the form of WELLFOCUS PPT was used as an intervention with 37 individuals, 51% male, 49% female, diagnosed with psychotic disorders (schizophrenia 38.5%; 33.3% bipolar disorder; and 28.2% psychosis/psychotic depression)(p. 86). Participants were between 18 and 65 years of age, with a mean of 45.6 years of age with a $SD = 10.3$; ethnicity 40% White British and 24% Black British African. Mixed methods were used in that the researchers wanted feedback as to how effective the treatment was or was not, and not purely quantitative feedback. The treatment involved WELLFOCUS as the control and as the intervention. The therapy was comprised of 11

weekly sessions for 90 minutes. The positive psychology therapy (PPT) components used for the intervention were: "positive responding (responding to others in an active and constructive way), savoring, personal strengths, gratitude, forgiveness, and identifying positives from negative situations" (Brownell, Schrank, Jakaite, Larkin, & Slade, 2015, p. 86). Additional components involved mindful listening to music before and after each session, therapists self-disclosing their own experiences with PPT, phone calls between the sessions, and a celebration after the sessions were completed (p. 86).

The participants were divided into two groups, which alternated between interviews and focus groups. All responses were recorded and transcribed verbatim with the exception of three, which were written because these participants declined being recorded. The qualitative portion of the intervention involved participants stating what was useful and what was challenging and difficult. The interviews lasted between 5 and 100 minutes, and the focus sessions between 75 and 105 minutes (p. 86).

Each session involved the following interventions: welcome, savoring, good things (examples of what has gone well that day), strengths (identification as well as utilization of human character strengths and virtues), forgiveness (letting go of a grudge or writing a forgiveness letter), one door closes, another opens (how something positive comes out of something negative), gratitude (in the form of a letter thanking someone for their contribution to the participant's life), and celebration (achievement and practice of the PPT interventions) (p. 87).

Emergent themes were drawn from three categories: General Experiences, Core Components of PPT, and WELLFOCUS PPT-Specific Components. Regarding General

Experiences, almost all of the participants reported that the interventions helped them to give attention to the positive aspects of their lives, avoid rumination, and use their strengths to add enjoyment to their lives. Two participants were able to use their character strengths to gain voluntary employment (p. 87). Half of the participants felt supported and accepted during the sessions, even with what they deemed the more negative aspects such as forgiveness and gratitude, which were reported to be a more emotionally demanding component of the therapy sessions. Fifty of the participants were described as severely depressed, and after completing the three blessings exercise, 94% were described as only mildly or moderately depressed 14 days after the intervention. Six participants had ceased smoking and had maintained abstinence 23 days after the intervention.

In a research study regarding breast cancer survivors, Cerezo, Ortiz-Callo, Cardenal, and De La Torre-Luque (2014) used positive psychology constructs to assess if these interventions would increase the participants happiness and well-being in the areas of emotional intelligence, resilience, optimism, positivity, and coping strategies following their surgeries. Participants were 18 years of age and older with an ($n = 175$). Eighty-seven participants received the intervention and 88 were waitlisted. Thirty-two participants did not complete the study. The method involved a population of women who were members of the Association for the Care of Women with Breast Cancer, Malaga, Spain (ASAMMA). The intervention entailed 14 two-hour sessions, measuring for cognitive and affective components of well-being and happiness, emotional intelligence, resilience, and self-esteem (Cerezo, Ortiz-Callo, Cardenal, & De La Torre-Luque, 2014, p. 48). "Pre-post tests involved the following surveys and scales: Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, Emmons,

Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) The Trait Meta-Mood Scale–24 (TMMS–24) is the reduced

version (24 items) of Trait Meta-Mood Scale (TMMS–48; Salovey, Mayer, Goldman,

Turvey, & Palfai, 1995; adapted to the Spanish population by Fernández-Berrocal, Alcaide,

Domínguez, Fernández-McNally, Ramos, & Ravira, 1998; Fernández-Berrocal, Extremera,

& Ramos, 2004); Life Orientation Test Revised (LOT–R; Scheier & Carver, 1985 ; Spanish

version by Fernández & Bermúdez, 1999); Connor-Davidson Resilience Scale (CD-RISC;

Connor & Davidson, 2003 ; Spanish version by Bobes, Bascaran, García-Portilla, Bousoño,

Sáiz, & Wallance, 2001);The Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965; Spanish

version by Echeburúa, 1995)" (Cerezo, Ortiz-Callo, Cardenal, and De La Torre-Luque,

2014, pp. 48-49).

     Women were placed in groups of 10-15 for the weekly two-hour sessions for 14

weeks. During these sessions, positive psychology was used in the form of mindfulness-

based exercises, self-knowledge, mutual support exercises, positive attitude and

communication skills, changing negative and maladaptive attitudes, promotion of

optimism, resilience, and humor. Each session ended with guided imagery exercises,

relaxation, and meditation (p. 50).

     Analysis of Covariance (ANCOVA) was used with the independent variable being

the experimental group vs. the wait-listed group, and the dependent variables being well-

being, emotional intelligence, optimism, resilience, and self-esteem (p. 51). The

experimental group showed higher score on all variables, with happiness measuring "[χ^2

$(6) = 80.21, p < .001$, phi $= .68$]; the experimental group had higher scores ($M = 6.16$, $SD =$

0.87) than the waitlist group ($M = 4.34$, $SD = 1.26$)" (Cerezo, Ortiz-Callo, Cardenal, and

De La Torre-Luque, 2014, p. 53). The researchers concluded that utilizing human strengths

and positive psychology were deemed more effective than placing an emphasis on

pathological symptoms and mental illness. Future research will involve random sampling

of breast cancer survivors who are not already part of a particular support group.

<center>Positive Psychology in Popular Media</center>

One of the goals of positive psychology was to take scientific research and create a

means to which laypeople could make sense of the data and actually benefit from the

discoveries and findings (Seligman, Steen, Park, & Peterson, 2005). Seligman (1994, 1998,

2002, 2011) wrote national bestsellers, which provided readers with the means to take

surveys, reflect on the research, and take action steps toward obtaining more happiness in

their lives. These books involved learning optimism, cultivating authentic happiness, and

flourishing in an individual's life. Fredrickson (2009) wrote *Positivity,* which investigates

the broaden and build theory of positive experiences expanding an individual's resources,

therefore spiraling toward more positive experiences and subjective well-being.

Csikszentmihalyi (1975, 1990, 1996, 1997, 2003) wrote several books pertaining to flow,

creativity theory, and peak experiences. Lyubomirsky (2007) wrote *The how of*

happiness: A new approach to getting what you want in life, which states that 40% of what

makes up an individual's life can be changed for the better if s/he engages in various

happiness-producing activities.

Positive psychology research has been conducted at various universities around the

country. Seligman teaches and conducts his research at the University of Pennsylvania;

Peterson, before his untimely death, at the University of Michigan; Csikszentmihalyi at the

University of Chicago and Claremont Graduate University; Diener at the University of

Illinois at Urbana-Champaign; Fredrickson at the University of North Carolina at Chapel

Hill; Haidt at the University of Virginia, Emmons at the University of California, Davis;

and Lyubomirsky at Stanford University and the University of California, Riverside. These

psychologists and their graduate student researchers conducted experiments in order to

determine the precepts of happiness and the constructs of positive psychology.

As the human character strengths and virtues dictate, happiness requires courage,

perseverance, bravery, resilience, persistence, humor, self-determination, and self-

discipline (Seligman, 2011; Haidt, 2006). Individuals, who are deemed psychologically

healthy, according to the 24 human character strengths and virtues, tend to take calculated

risks to enhance personal growth and experience, express gratitude, volunteer to help a

person or community, or cultivate their curiosity of new and engaging experiences

(Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2013). Fox (2013), director of the Affective Neuroscience

Laboratory in the department of psychology at the University of Essex in England, wrote

about cognitive-bias modification, which deals with changing the way an individual

interprets and assesses an event. Accurate analysis, reflection, and interpretation of an

event, whether positive or negative, led to changes in behavior as well as the chemical

makeup and structures of the brain. The ability to envision an event realistically, yet

positively, is key to coping with positive or negative circumstances and creating the

necessary mechanisms to deal in a productive manner (Amen, 2011; Fox, 2013;

Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006). Therefore, research has been conducted

utilizing positive psychology in clinical and medical settings. Areas of interest in the

psychological as well as medical realm involve positive psychology therapy as a means to help clinically depressed clients as well as those who have undergone major surgical and medical procedures such as cancer survivors. Future research may involve more online interventions with positive psychology known as Online Positive Psychology Interventions (OPPI) as the Internet becomes a more cost effective mode of therapy, which taps into a wider audience and clientele (Sergeant & Mongrain, 2014).

<div align="center">Nontraditional Students as an Underrepresented Research Population</div>

There is little research regarding the nontraditional career college student. Most psychological research is conducted with traditional students age 18-21. The nontraditional student is one of the fastest growing populations on college campuses. Academic, social, and personal successes are necessary in order for the nontraditional student to maintain retention in school, complete his/her studies, and eventually graduate. The purpose of this research study was to investigate if the assessment and utilization of positive psychology in foundational psychology courses assists students in attaining academic, social, and personal goals, therefore aiding in the completion of nontraditional students' studies.

<div align="center">Pursuance of Goals as a Positive Psychology Construct</div>

Many positive psychologists have determined that the setting, pursuing, and accomplishing of goals are key to an individual's happiness (Brunstein, 1993; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990, 1996, 1997; Fredrickson, 2001, 2005, 2009; Haidt, 2006; King, 2001; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005; Lyubomirsky, Sheldon, & Schkade, 2005; Seligman, 2011). Kaplan (1992) has determined human beings are naturally knowledge-seeking, goal-accomplishing mammals; it is inherent in the

species. The ability for human ancestors to use mental and physical resources and attain

goals was necessary for survival, and these characteristics are heritable. In order for

humans to continue to thrive happily, the attainment of positive goals is considered, by

many, necessary to maintain physiological and psychological well-being (Fredrickson,

2009; Haidt, 2006; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman, 2011). For these reasons, attainment of

an academic, social, and/or personal goal was key to this research study.

<center>Attainment of Academic, Social, and/or Personal Goals</center>

The attainment, achievement, and mastery of goals, especially approach goals, over

avoidance goals, are necessary for overall accomplishment (Senko, Hulleman, &

Harackiewicz, 2001). For Seligman (2011), this involved positive emotion, engagement,

relationship, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). In the case of Csikszentmihalyi

(1990), this involved attaining *flow*, which is the pursuit of an activity in which an

individual has mastered a skill that takes the individual into a psychological state of non-

self-consciousness, concentrated intrigue, timelessness, ecstasy, and achievement.

Lyubomirsky (2007) stated that several activities could be pursued, such as: positive

thinking and gratitude, relationships, coping mechanisms, living in the present, goal

pursuit, spirituality, and physical and mental health. In the case of Fredrickson (2009), this

involves: creating positive meaning; savoring goodness; counting blessings; connecting

with others; opening one's mind and heart; applying strengths; practicing mindfulness

meditation; broadening and building positive attributes; and pursuing positive future goals.

Therefore, the nontraditional students in this research study were required to read

about positive psychology; assess their own human character strengths and virtues; create

an academic, social, and/or personal goal; reflect on the process; and take pre-and post inventories as to the effectiveness of the endeavor. By pursuing self-determined academic goals, this may lead to college and career success, assist in the completion of studies, and improve overall well-being.

Academic Goals

Examples of academic goals that the students created for themselves involved getting an "A" on a research paper, getting an A in particular course, maintaining a 3.5-4.0 GPA for the term, maintaining perfect attendance, or getting placed on the dean's list or president's honor roll. In order to attain these goals, the student created timelines and self-created, meaningful steps toward the overall goal. When students held conferences with their teacher and monitored the steps toward achieving their goals, they tended to be more successful in attaining their goals (Garafalia & Gredler, 2002).

Social Goals

A social goal that was pursued by the students in this study was to enhance their spousal relationships as well as social connections in school. Nontraditional students are often older adults who are returning to college after already having established marriages, families, and jobs (Horn, 1996; Spellman, 2007). Spellman (2007) noted in her research that some of the barriers to college retention for nontraditional students were the ability to manage parental obligations, as well as spousal relationships while working and going to school. The ability to network and feel a part of the campus and collegiate environment has been associated with higher success in college and a feeling of belongingness (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014).

<u>Personal Goals</u>

The pursuit of a personal goal involved physical exercise, better diet choices, or meditative practices. Mindfulness meditation has been found to be a key component in controlling negative thought patterns and rumination, which often lead to physical and mental illness (Davidson & Kabat-Zinn et al., 2003; Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2003, 2013). Students pursued mindfulness meditation as one of their personal goals conducted in this study. Fredrickson (2009), Lyubomirsky (2007), and Seligman (2011) stated that meditation is a key component to attaining happiness and well-being. Thought is the beginning of action regarding goal attainment (Cantor, 1990). Mindfulness meditation is the process of attending to thought, then releasing it. In order to avoid rumination, living in the present, and releasing negative thoughts are important components to psychological well-being (Amen, 2011; Lyubomirsky, 2007). Thus, mindfulness meditation was a personal goal that students may want to embark upon during his/her 9-week foundational course (Boyce, 2014; Fredrickson, 2009). Another personal goal involved students exploring their own creativity (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996; Simonton, 2009). Transcendence can take several forms. This includes spiritual practice, a walk in a nature, a visit to a museum, or engagement in art, music, or literature. This experience has the hallmark of creating a sense of awe (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; Fredrickson, 2009; Haidt, 2012; Keltner & Haidt, 2003).

<u>Coursework Utilizing Positive Psychology Interventions</u>

The coursework of this foundational class involved such activities as counting blessings, writing gratitude letters, practicing random acts of kindness, fulfilling homework

assignments in reflective journals, and taking the Authentic Happiness Survey (Peterson, 2005); the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985); and Values in Action- Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004). Participation in these activities were measured to determine if the setting and attainment of goals contribute to happiness, well-being, successful academic achievement, increased positive social relationships, and personal success.

<p style="text-align:center">Counting Blessings and Gratitude</p>

Counting blessings has been associated with greater levels of happiness and well-being (Emmons & McCullogh, 2003; Fredrickson, 2009; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman, 2011). The expression of gratitude appears to not only enhance the happiness of the receiver, but also the giver (Algoe, Haidt, & Gable, 2008; Emmons, 2007; Sheldon & Lyubomirsky, 2006; Watkins, Van Gelder, & Frias, 2009). When students were assigned gratitude activities in college courses, they were determined to be the most memorable and life-changing events that the giver and receiver of the gratitude letters experienced (Fredrickson, 2009; Lyubomirsky, 2007; Seligman, 2011). Additionally, regarding the positive psychology intervention of writing gratitude letters, Sin, Della Porta, and Lyubomirsky (2011) stated that individuals who were depressed, who expected to feel better after writing gratitude letters, did. Leontopoulou (2015) research stated the positive psychology intervention of writing about what one was grateful for increased well-being in emerging adults.

<p style="text-align:center">Inner Reflection through Journal Writing</p>

Inner reflection involved journal writing as well as self-assessment. Savoring, basking in the form of reminiscing, and reflection are means of intervention in positive psychology (Lambert D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2014); therefore, this was a component of this research study. Identifying one's character strengths is the beginning step to recognizing these as a vital tool in attainment of an individual's goals. When the student took the survey in the Authentic Happiness website at the University of Pennsylvania website, all 24 character strengths were listed, starting with the top five, and then descending down to 24 (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). These strengths were then used to assist the student in attaining his/her academic, social, and/or personal goal. Goal setting is necessary in order for the positive psychology interventions to be effective (Lambert D'raven & Pasha-Zaidi, 2014). This measurement was part of the quantitative analysis in this research study.

Literature Related to Key Variables and Concepts

Rather than emphasize neuroses and dysfunction, positive psychologists researched what makes life worth living and enables people to flourish rather than languish. Fredrickson (2009) stated that as one experiences and seeks out more positive experiences in life, these aspects tend to broaden and build an individual's repertoire of resources and positive networks which lend support her/his life: i.e., social, financial, emotional, and psychological. Similarly, positive emotions have been correlated to broaden cognitive functioning in the areas of flexibility, savoring, exploration, integration, creativity, unusual thinking, and scope of attention (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005).

In an experiment conducted by Fredrickson & Branigan, (2005), the researchers had hypothesized that positive film clips would produce positive emotion, and thus broaden attention as well as thought-action repertoires, and negative film clips would produce negative emotion, thus narrowing attention and thought-action repertoires. Film clips used to measure positive emotions in the form of amusement and contentment involved penguins playing and mountain scenery on a sunny day. Film clips used to measure negative emotions in the form of anger and anxiety, involved young males taunting Amish passers-by to elicit anger and disgust, and an intense, prolonged mountain climbing, cliff-hanger. The neutral clip involved colored sticks piling up. These film clips were shown to 104 traditional college students, 66 % women, of whom 81 were European American (64%), 23 ethnic minorities, (74% women, three Asian Americans, seven African Americans, and 13 mixed race) in an introductory psychology college course (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005, p. 318). Students were administered Emotion Report Forms (Ekman, Friesen, & Ancoli, 1980) and reported through a 9-point Likert scale (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011) with 0 as none and 8 as a great deal, on the following emotions: amusement, anger, anxiety, contentment, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and serenity.

Qualitative data were measured by two independent coders who classified thought-action data as the following: eat/drink, sleep/rest, read, exercise/sport, schoolwork/work, relish/reminisce, play, be antisocial (hit someone), be taken care of (yell for help), etc. Inter-rater reliability was 94.4%. Fredrickson and Branigan (2005) tested for global bias using a 5 x 2 x 2 ANOVA (Film x Group x Sex x Ethnicity) (p. 323). The main effect proved to be the film group $F(4,96) = 4.23$, $p = .042$ (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005, p.

323). The positive films indicated that there were significantly higher thought-action repertoires than the neutral film with the following data: $t(98) = 1.86$, $p = .033$. The separated scores for the positive films yielded $t(98) = 1.98$, $p = .025$. The serene mountain seen yielded $t(98) = 1.98 = 1.34$, $p = .109$ (Fredrickson, 2005, p. 324). Fredrickson and Branigan's (2005) research concluded the positive films combined yielded significantly larger thought-action repertoires than the two negative films combined $t(98) = 4.12$, $p < .001$ (p. 324). Thus, positive emotional states broadened thought repertoires more than neutral states, and slightly more than negative states with data indicating $t(98) = -1.53$, $p = .064$ (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005, p. 324). In Fredrickson and Branigan's (2005) discussion, they stated that positive emotions broadened thought attention repertoires as well as scopes of attention. Students were more likely to want to exercise, be out of doors, engage in social activities, and play.

Peterson, Seligman and Park (2005) developed the 24 human character strengths and virtues of psychologically healthy human beings. The "six strengths are: wisdom and knowledge (creativity, curiosity, love of learning, open-mindedness, perspective); courage (bravery, persistence, integrity); humanity (love, kindness, social intelligence); justice (citizenship, fairness, leadership); temperance (forgiveness and mercy, humility and modesty, prudence); and transcendence (appreciation of beauty, gratitude, hope, humor, spirituality)" (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 56; Peterson & Park, 2004). These are determined to be the characteristics of psychologically healthy human beings across cultures (Biswas-Diener, 2006; Dahlsgaard, Peterson, & Seligman, 2005; Delle Fave, Massimini, & Bassi, 2011). Each is expressed within various idiosyncratic differences,

based on whether one comes from an individualistic or collectivistic culture (Triandis, 2001). Individualistic cultures such as the United States, Northern Europe, Western Europe, Australia, and Canada may determine one's happiness based on one's own individual pursuits, quests, pleasures and affluence; needs of the nuclear family; and personal choices of self-selected in-groups. Collectivistic cultures such as Asia, Latin America, Middle Eastern, Southern Europe, African, the Mediterranean, and Pacific Islanders may determine happiness from social connection to friends; nuclear as well as extended family; and associations with an in-group, which includes place of employment and community. Individual goals and pursuits tend not to be as important as group happiness in collectivistic cultures (Triandis, Bontempo, & Villareal, 1988).

Summary and Conclusions

Most psychological research has been conducted with traditional undergraduate populations, ages 18-21. Little research has been conducted regarding the nontraditional, career college student. One of the fastest growing populations on college campuses today is the nontraditional student who is 25 years of age, employed full-time, and/or married with children. The nontraditional student is more likely to drop out of college within the first year because of the demands of college, work, spouses, and family obligations. When nontraditional students are successful in the completion of their degrees, the average completion rate is 6 years in college or university. The purpose of this study was to determine if the application of positive psychology constructs in foundational courses could assist students in achieving academic, social, and/or personal goals therefore aiding retention, in the completion of studies, and in increased overall well-being. Mixed methods

research was used for this study, using qualitative methods in the form of reflective journal writing, homework, and class discussions. Quantitative methods involved pre- and post inventories surveys, and measurement of goal attainment. If the application of positive psychology in foundational college courses helps nontraditional college students achieve academic, social, and personal goals, this would create positive social change in academia and enrich the lives of students by enhancing their collegiate experience and future career goals utilizing their character strengths, and also inform similar interventions with nontraditional students.

Chapter 3 discussed the mixed methods research conducted for this study. Mixed methods proved to be the best research tool regarding this study in that surveys alone could not fully express the effect that the positive psychology curriculum had on the students regarding their abilities to accomplish goals and enhance their of over-all sense of well being. Rich textual analysis lent itself toward a greater understanding of the positive effect positive psychology had on the nontraditional students' experiences in their foundational courses.

Chapter 3: Research Method

Introduction

This dissertation addressed the following gap in the research literature: the impact of exposure to a positive psychology curriculum among nontraditional students taking a foundational course in a career college. It was hypothesized that over the 9-week course students would improve on measures of self-reported well-being and goal attainment. In turn these would be linked to a higher level of engagement in academic studies and thus

have implications for students' commitment to complete their areas of study. Mixed methods were used to (a) assess the changes in students' well-being, goal setting, and attainment over the 9-week term, and to (b) identify emergent themes from qualitative analysis of students' reflections and written assignments. The research question in this study was: Is exposure to a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students associated with positive personal, academic, or social goals as evidenced in qualitative and quantitative data from surveys, student reflections, instructor report, and improvement in self-reported authentic happiness? The purpose of this study was to determine, both qualitatively and quantitatively, if applying one's character strengths, as well as positive psychology constructs, toward an academic, social, or personal goal led to success in foundational courses, thereby increasing retention, completion of studies, and overall well-being. Qualitative analyses were used to (a) identify emergent themes in journals and reflections and (b) to analyze observational data and changes in self-report measures from pre-to-post curriculum which were integrated to assess the impact of exposure to positive psychology in adult learners (Campbell & Stanley, 1963,1966; Creswell, 2009; Rocco et al., 2003). Quantitative assessment of change on key measures lent support to hypothesized effects of the curriculum on student well-being and goal attainment. Qualitative data allowed me to integrate rich description and first-hand accounts with the quantitative findings and were hypothesis-generating as to the factors that are associated with positive changes (Sullivan, 2002).

In this study, I (a) assessed whether teaching positive psychology constructs, (b) informed students of their 24 character strengths through the VIA Inventory of Strengths

(Seligman & Peterson, 2004), and (c) applyied them toward accomplishing an academic, social, and/or personal goal had a positive impact on students. As was evidenced in their reflections and in observational data (qualitative), or in changes from pre- to post-assessment on measures of the Authentic Happiness Survey (Peterson, 2005) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) (quantitative), goal attainment and overall sense of well-being indicated increased positive change.

In past research, Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, and Linkins, (2009) used the VIA Signature Strengths for Youth (https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/) as an intervention as part of the Penn Resiliency Program. Seligman (2011) also used this survey at the Geelong Grammar School in Australia. The adult version, the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004) was used as the intervention for this research study. Nontraditional student retention, particularly in the first years of school, is critical for completion of one's college degree and long-term success (Alarcon & Edwards, 2013; Daley, 2010; Horn, 1996; Spellman, 2007). By accomplishing one's goals within this positive psychology curriculum, success in foundational coursework, as well as degree attainment, was facilitated.

Setting

The sample involved 25 nontraditional students from a Western private career college (total population 333) enrolled in foundational classes. Students who attend this career college attain degrees in criminal justice, business, medical assisting, information technology, computer aided drafting (CAD), construction management, graphic design, and

game art design. The population was ethnically diverse but with a large Hispanic representation. All students commute to school. The student population fit the one or more of the nontraditional criteria: (a) followed a nonlinear progression from high school to college, (b) had part-time or full-time jobs, (c) lived with spouses or significant others, (d) had one or more children, (e) were first generation college students, (f) attained a GED as opposed to a high school diploma, and (g) was 25 years of age or older. The sample was a convenience sample in that predetermined college classes, enrolled in specific foundational courses, were the subjects for this study. The majority of students were attaining associate's of science degrees. The population of 25 students was sufficient for a mixed methods study that involved qualitative study and the measurement of an attainable, self-determined goal. Career colleges may be new territory for positive psychology research.

The professor also participated in the study by providing qualitative data in a reflective journal as to her experiences with teaching positive psychology as a part of her foundational course. The professor was able to evaluate what was effective in the curriculum, what was ineffective, and what could be deleted as part of the curriculum. The professor's participation and reflection as an instructor of positive psychology constructs aided in future study and implementation as a pedagogical influence involving the curriculum.

Research Design and Rationale

The primary research questions for this mixed methods study were as follows:

<u>Quantitative</u>

RQ1:   Is the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum (independent variable) in a foundational class of nontraditional students associated with attainment of academic, social, or personal goals (dependent variable)?

H^1_0 : A majority of students will not report goal attainment.

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is not associated with the attainment of goals.

H^1_A: A majority of students will report goal attainment.

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is associated with the attainment of goals.

RQ2:   Is the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being?

H^2_0: $\mu_1 - \mu_2 = 0$ The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is not associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being.

H^2_A: $\mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$ The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being.

<center>Qualitative</center>

<center>Guiding Questions</center>

1. Do students report positive social and learning experiences with the course, as evidenced by qualitative analysis of journals, reflections, and written class assignments?

2. What lessons can be learned from the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational course among nontraditional students that can inform future interventions?

According to Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003), mixed methods designs "can strengthen the power of studies, inferences, and conclusion" (p. 603). Merriam and Simpson (2000) have stated that "both types of data [quantitative and qualitative] are useful in the systematic inquiry related to adult education and training" (p. 147). Therefore, mixed methods were the preferred design for this study in order to measure quantitatively if there were any change measures in attainment of goals, completion of studies, or overall well-being. Qualitative measures determined the various themes that arose from nontraditional students taking a foundational course with an emphasis in positive psychology.

Changes were assessed from baseline to follow-up on two quantitative measures in order to determine whether student exposure to the positive psychology curriculum has an impact on student well-being as hypothesized. The Authentic Happiness Inventory (Peterson, 2005) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin 1985) were administered pre-and-post curriculum in order to determine if the student's overall happiness and life satisfaction changed over the 9-week term of participation in the positive psychology curriculum, consistent with hypothesized effects. The second quantitative measure was the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman &

Peterson, 2004). This survey helped the student to determine his/her 24 character strengths. Once the survey was completed, students then used their top five strengths as a means to accomplishing their goal. The third quantitative measure involved students creating an academic, social, and/or personal goal that they wanted to accomplish within the 9-week term. One of the gaps in the literature regarding the utilization of positive psychology constructs is the lack of measurable evidence that applying one's character strengths in an academic setting, such as a foundational course in a career college, can assist a student in reaching an academic, social, and/or personal goal.

The qualitative measurement in this study involved the researcher identifying themes from the students' journal entries as they completed various exercises from Peterson's (2006) *A primer in positive psychology.* Students completed in-class exercises as well as homework assignments derived from this text. In addition to these exercises, students completed exercises devised by Seligman and Peterson (2011): (a) gratitude letter, (b) three things that went well counting blessings exercise, and (c) random acts of kindness exercise (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Students needed to complete at least 80% of the homework exercises from Peterson's text, and 80% of the Seligman and Peterson exercises. As part of the attendance policies of this particular college, students may not miss two classes in a row, or they will be dropped from the course. For the purposes of this study, students did not have more than a total of four absences, and thus, remained in the study. This allowed for the occasional student absence from class. Missing data was replaced with make-up assignments for the days that the students were absent. Attrition for this particular college is typically between 10 and 50%. The goal of this particular research study was to assess if

the study and application of positive psychology constructs enhanced student well-being, assisted in the attainment of goals, and reduced attrition.

Role of Researcher

The professor assisted the students in taking the online surveys and inventories; handed out Chris Peterson's (2006) *A primer in positive psychology* text readings; and printed hard copies of online assignments for data collection. I did not teach the course curriculum. As this research study was an analysis of secondary data, I simply collected and analyzed the data after the course.

Assumptions

In addition to the study's operational definitions, certain assumptions were made about the data: students (a) answered completely and truthfully from their in-class and homework assignments; (b) answered honestly regarding their surveys; (c) created an attainable academic, social, and personal goal; (d) did not miss more than 4 classes; (e) completed 80% of their assignments; (f) the professor was reflective and taught the classes with fidelity to the positive psychology curriculum; and (g) the course retained 25 students for the quantitative analyses.

These assumptions were necessary to maintain the quality of the study and to ensure that I was measuring quantitatively, and analyzing qualitatively, was what I set out to accomplish with this study.

Methodology

Participation Selection Logic

The population sample involved 25 nontraditional students from a Western career college enrolled in a foundational class. The population of this career college is 333 students. Students who attend this career college attain their degrees in criminal justice, business, medical assisting, information technology, computer-aided-drafting (CAD), construction management, graphic design, and game art design. The population is ethnically diverse with a large Hispanic representation. The campus is nonresidential, and all students commute to school. The student population fits the nontraditional criteria in that they fit one or more of the following descriptions: (a) followed a nonlinear progression from high school to college, (b) have part-time or full-time jobs, (c) live with spouses or significant others, (d) have one or more children, (e) are first generation college students, (f) attained a GED as opposed to a high school diploma, and (g) are 25 years of age or older. The sample was a convenience sample in that a predetermined college class, enrolled in a specific foundational course, was the subject for this study. The majority of students are attaining their associate's of science degrees. The population of 25 students was sufficient for a qualitative/quantitative mixed methods research study involving qualitative study and measurement of an attainable, self-determined goal. Career colleges may be new territory for positive psychology research.

<u>Power Analysis</u>

According to Cohen (1992), for a study with a sample size of 25 with an $\alpha = 0.05$ (two-tailed) with a mean paired difference of 0.5, and standard deviation of paired difference equal to 1.0, the power is estimated to be .80.

The sample population for this particular study involved 25 nontraditional students taking a foundational course with an emphasis in positive psychology. The study was a mixed methods design, therefore, 25 participants was adequate for the study.

<div align="center">Instrumentation</div>

Quantitative measurement was taken utilizing the Authentic Happiness Survey (2005); The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and a researcher designed Likert-type scale (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011) to measure for goal accomplishment.

<div align="center">Psychometric Properties</div>

The normative sample for Seligman and Peterson's VIA-IS (2004) involved 150,000 individuals who took the test using the Internet (66% female, 34% male), typically married, employed and some post-high school education (LaFollette, 2010). Reliability showed internal consistency of ($\alpha > .70$). Validity indicated the VIA-IS was developed from Wellsprings and Gallup Organizations Strengthfinder, undergraduate students, and experts in the field of positive psychology (LaFollette, 2010). Self-nominations correlate ($r = .5$). Gender/racial/ethnic differences, according to LaFollette (2010), show no significant ethnic differences appear among U.S. census groupings (African American, European American, Asian American, Latin American, and Native American)(p. 4).

The psychometric properties of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) are adequate amongst various populations (Noonan & Chan, 2013). Reliability indicated that internal consistency as (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.83$-0.92).

Test and re-test reliability indicated ($r = 0.65$). Validity indicates correlation with the Life Satisfaction Questionnaire (LISAT-9-11)(Spearman's $r = .60$).

Changes in student well-being were assessed pre- and post-curriculum. Students took the Authentic Happiness Inventory (Peterson, 2005), as well as the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), at the beginning and at the end of the 9-week course in order to test the significance and the direction of change in student response to the measure.

Students took the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004) at the beginning of the course. This determined and ranked the student's 24 character strengths, and then ranked the top five. The top five strengths were used to accomplish an academic, social, and/or personal goal. A post-curriculum assessment was administered to assess to what extent they felt they perceive themselves to have accomplished their goal.

Students responded to a Likert-type scale (Croasmun & Ostrom, 2011) to the following question:

Over the past nine weeks of this course, to what extent have you accomplished the academic, social, or personal goal that you defined for yourself at the beginning of the course:

    1 = not at all
    2 = not too much
    3 = to some extent
    4 = to a great extent

This item was post-test only. Therefore, it was hypothesized that accomplishment of goal attainment as measured by this item would correlate positively with changes in the

pre-post measures of the Authentic Happiness Scale (Peterson, 2005) and the Satisfaction

with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985).

H2: $r \neq 0$

Qualitative

For the qualitative measurements of this mixed methods study, students responded

to the following pre-course guiding question in their online journals:

1. What do you expect, if anything, to accomplish regarding your own academic,

   social, and personal goals as a result of taking a foundational course, with an

   emphasis in positive psychology this term?

2. Students completed exercises and recorded their responses in their online journals

   from Chris Peterson's (2006) *A primer in positive psychology*, as well as various

   exercises assigned by the instructor.

3. Students wrote responses in their online journals after engaging in Seligman's

   (2011), Peterson's (2006), and Lyubomirsky's (2007) exercises:

   - Gratitude Letter

   - Three Things That Went Well Counting Blessings exercise

   - Random Acts of Kindness exercise

Data Collection Method

Data were coded and participants remained anonymous. I complied with all IRB

guidelines per the Walden IRB.

Quantitative

Students recorded their pre-course and post-course data from the Authentic

Happiness Survey (Peterson, 2005), The Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener,

Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and the researcher-created Likert-type scale (Croasmun

& Ostrom, 2011) measuring for goal completion. I inputted these scores in an Excel

spreadsheet for statistical analysis.

<div align="center">Qualitative</div>

I collected the students' hard copy of their online journals at the end of the 9-week

course to record and analyze responses and written reflections, using a qualitative study

structure to pull out various themes that arose as a result of taking a foundational course

with an emphasis in positive psychology. At the end of the course, students wrote a final

reflection answering the guiding question: What have you discovered, if anything, about

yourself by writing reflective journal responses to the course material and Peterson's

(2006) *A primer in positive psychology*? And the guiding question: To what extent, if at all,

do you feel you have accomplished your goal academically, socially, and personally as a

result of taking a foundational course with an emphasis in positive psychology? I used

Excel for recording responses and reflections from the students' journals and to identify

distinct themes in the student reflections.

The professor's journal and the students' journals were coded. I left information for

the students and professor as to where they could reclaim their hard copy journals, if they

so desired, after the research data analysis was completed. The survey results and journals

remained locked in a secure cabinet during the course of the research study. If the students

and the professor chose not to retrieve their journals at the end of the data analysis of the

study, I will keep them securely locked and stored until a reasonable amount of time has passed as determined by the IRB to destroy them.

Data Analysis

The hypotheses for the quantitative portion of this mixed methods study were as follows:

RQ1: Is the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum (independent variable) in a foundational class of nontraditional students associated with attainment of academic, social, or personal goals (dependent variable)?

H^1_0: A majority of students will not report goal attainment.

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is not associated with the attainment of goals.

H^1_A: A majority of students will report goal attainment.

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is associated with the attainment of goals.

RQ2: Is the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being?

H^2_0: $\mu_1 - \mu_2 = 0$ The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is not associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being.

H^2_A $\mu_1 - \mu_2 \neq 0$ The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being.

For the quantitative data, descriptive statistics, means, standard deviations, and paired samples *t* tests were conducted. For the qualitative data, qualitative study was used to find emergent themes from the responses and written reflections and was recorded from the students' online journal entries.

The data analysis included the following:

1. Pre- and post results from the Authentic Happiness Survey (Peterson, 2005) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). A paired samples *t* test was used to assess the significance and direction of change from pre-to-post curriculum.

2. Determination of the five top character strengths were used to assist the student in achieving his/her academic goal as described by the student's response in the post-survey questions.

3. A post-test measured to what extent the student felt s/he was able to accomplish her/his academic, social, or personal goal after applying her/his 24 character strengths and utilizing the positive psychology constructs learned in class. The correlation of this measure with changes in pre-post measures was assessed. It was hypothesized that changes in well-being, as measured by the Authentic Happiness Survey (Peterson, 2005) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) were correlated with self-reported goal attainment.

4. Analysis of themes extracted from students' online journal entries.

5. Post-survey reflection questions from students' online journals after the students completed the course.

7. Determination of course retention and term retention.

8. SPSS Software, and Microsoft Excel were used for data analysis.

9. Data cleaning involved having students make up any missing homework assignments or class work. Students who dropped out of the study were eliminated from the data set.

10. Confirmability, reflexivity, and subjectivity were gauged by intra- and inter-coder reliability consultations with the professor teaching the course (Sullivan, 2002).

Threats to Validity

The researcher consulted with the professor teaching the course as needed to maintain fidelity to the curriculum. I did not teach the course. The professor's personal journal, as well as weekly meetings, was instrumental in this endeavor to maintain validity and reliability. I bracketed any biases toward positive psychology and its capacity to affect the students' ability to achieve academic, social, and/or personal goals or to affect positive change in happiness and life satisfaction. The purpose of the qualitative portion of this study was two-fold: (a) to identify themes that arose from students' experiences of taking a foundational course with an emphasis in positive psychology, and (b) to glean possible insight as to how positive psychology either affected students positively, negatively, or not at all toward accomplishing a predetermined academic, social, and/or personal goal in their

foundational psychology course. A final reflection involved answering the following

questions:

1. Did you feel your experiences in the foundational course with an emphasis in

positive psychology influenced/assisted you in accomplishing the goal you set for

yourself? If so, please describe what specific exercises/course content helped you

accomplish this goal and how you feel your experiences with these exercises aided

you in this accomplishment?

2. Do you feel your experiences in the course helped you to overcome any obstacles

in terms of being able to realize the goals you set for yourself? If so, please explain

in what ways you felt the positive psychology experiences/exercises were helpful in

this regard.

3. To what extent, if any, do you feel that the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS:

Seligman & Peterson, 2004) you engaged in had a positive effect in terms of being

able to accomplish the goals you set for yourself?

4. Were there any other specific positive psychology exercises or course content

that you felt had a particularly noticeable effect on your being able to attain the

goals you set? Please elaborate.

In order to address social desirability bias, the journals were coded, and the

responses remained anonymous (Nederhoff, 1985). I phrased questions in a neutral fashion

to minimize any bias as well. I did not teach the course. When the students responded to the

post-survey questions, the professor and I were not present in the room to help reduce

social desirability bias and the possible effects of demand characteristics (Nederhoff,

1985). The mixed methods approach was suited for this study because the evaluation of a curriculum had both qualitative and quantitative dimensions. Pre-post measurements of quantitative domains of well-being and goal attainment provided evidence to assess whether happiness and goal attainment were affected by exposure to positive psychology concepts.

Change measurement was also a good approach to assess if goal attainment was associated with studying and participating in a course with an emphasis on positive psychology constructs. A normally distributed difference *t* test was used for the statistical analysis, for a pre-post assessment of change (Campbell & Stanley, 1966 Gravetter & Wallnau, 2009). In the case of this research study, the change treatment was assessed as a function of engagement of various positive psychology exercises conducted in a foundational course in order to determine if there was a significant change in the Authentic Happiness Survey (Peterson, 2005) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) measurements at the end of the course.

The qualitative component of this study was used to investigate the possible themes that arose from the qualitative study structure. When the researcher determined what the participants' experience was with the intervention, qualitative data allowed for a first hand description of the experience. The students' interaction with the homework assignments, in-class activities, and journal reflections provided me with the necessary information as to how the students were affected by exposure to the positive psychology curriculum. The triangulation of the qualitative and the quantitative method allowed for an assessment of convergent validation of the study (Rocco et al. 2003; Tashakkhori & Teddlie, 2003). The

students' recorded journal experiences measured against their abilities to accomplish an academic, social, and/or personal goal. Participation in the positive psychology curriculum was associated with changes in happiness (goal attainment), as measured by the students' self-reported responses regarding their ability to accomplish their goal, the Authentic Happiness Survey (Peterson, 2005), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Therefore, mixed methods were the research methodology of choice in order to measure the effectiveness of the intervention and record the students' personal experiences with the intervention. The qualitative study component added to the body of research regarding students' experiences with positive psychological constructs implemented in a foundational course.

Issues of Trustworthiness

For the qualitative portion of this research study, I consulted with the professor teaching the course, as needed, in order to achieve inter-rater reliability. I did not teach the course. The professor teaching the course would consult with me periodically to clarify positive psychology exercises, components for journal entries, and research questions for the final reflection. For the quantitative portion of the research study, the survey results from the websites were recorded in the students' journals, and the professor teaching the course cross-referenced for accurate recording of these data. I collected all data at the end of the course.

Ethical Procedures

I abided by all governing regulations and procedures that applied to the college and conduct of classes. I worked closely with school officials to ensure the well-being and

protection of participants and the confidentiality of data. I followed all IRB approved procedures in the conduct of the research. I abided by the Code of Ethics of the American Psychological Association regarding research subjects (American Psychological Association, 2014). The research study involved the collection of secondary research data, thus a debriefing session was not needed.

Summary

A mixed method, quasi-experimental design, was proposed as a research design for this study (Rocco et al., 2003). In the field of education, this was a desired, frequently used design because it allowed for quantitative measurement through surveys as well as first-hand evaluation from the participants as to how the study was affecting their lives. The goal of this preliminary study was to provide insight as to whether teaching positive psychology constructs to students in foundational courses would assist students in attaining an academic, social, or personal goal, and this would have implications for student success and retention in college courses as well as overall well-being. Additionally, this study contributed evidence with which to evaluate the study, implementation, and application of positive psychology in foundational psychology courses. Descriptive findings and evaluation of the curriculum may have a positive social impact on academia and be generalizable to other courses of study. Presenting the process and the outcomes of this positive psychology curriculum might enable the replication of this curriculum in other educational settings and with other student populations, as well as inform program evaluation of educational interventions.

Chapter 4: Results

Introduction

Using mixed methods, the purpose of this research was to investigate whether foundational courses in a career college of nontraditional students which were taught with an emphasis in positive psychology could have a positive impact on students by increasing their overall well-being and helping them attain academic, social, and personal goals, as assess by change in measures of the Authentic Happiness Scale (Peterson, 2005) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) collected at the beginning of the course with the same measures collected at the end of the course, and with additional qualitative and quantitative data collected on student perceptions of the course. To date, little research had been done on positive psychology and the nontraditional student at a career college. This study used both a quantitative and a qualitative research design to address the following research questions:

<u>Quantitative</u>

RQ1:   Is the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum (independent variable) in a foundational class of nontraditional students associated with attainment of academic, social, or personal goals (dependent variable)?

H^1_0: A majority of students will not report goal attainment.

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is not associated with the attainment of goals.

H^1_A: A majority of students will report goal attainment.

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is associated with the attainment of goals.

RQ2:   Is the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being?

H^2_0: μ_1-μ_2 =0 The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is not associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being.

H^2_A: μ_1-$\mu_2 \neq 0$ The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being.

<u>Qualitative</u>

Guiding Questions

1. Do students report positive social and learning experiences with the course, as evidenced by qualitative analysis of journals, reflections, and written class assignments?

2. What lessons can be learned from the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational course among nontraditional students that can inform future interventions?

Setting

The participants in this research study were 25 nontraditional college students enrolled in foundational courses in a Western private career college. The winter term occurred from January 6, 2016 to March 1, 2016. The population of this career college is 333 students. Students who attend this career college attain their degrees in criminal justice,

business, medical assisting, information technology, computer-aided-rafting (CAD), construction management, graphic design, and game art design. The population is ethnically diverse with a large Hispanic representation. The campus is nonresidential, and all students commute to school. The student population fits the nontraditional criteria in that the students fit one or more of the following descriptions: (a) followed a nonlinear progression from high school to college, (b) have part-time or full-time jobs, (c) live with spouses or significant others, (d) have one or more children, (e) are first generation college students, (f) attained a GED as opposed to a high school diploma, and (g) are 25 years of age or older. The sample is a convenience sample in that students in predetermined college classes, enrolled in specific foundational courses, were the subjects for this study. The majority of students are attaining their associate's of science degrees.

During this term, the students were told that their college was closing and would be taken over by another university. The students had to decide whether to transfer their credit to the new university and continue toward graduation with the new university or transfer to another school. This created an environment of anxiety and uncertainty as the students had to make critical decisions regarding their college educations. Students completed the term and then made decisions as how to proceed with their education. One hundred and fifty students chose to stay with the new university and complete their education. Many students transferred to other colleges and universities.

Demographics

A summary of Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of gender, age, and race for an ($N = 25$). As can be seen in Tables 1, 2, and 3, respectively, the majority of participants

was female, under 30 years of age, and was ethically and racially diverse. The sample

involved an (N = 25) with 10 males (40%) and 15 females (60%). The 25 participants

consisted of the following racial and ethnic groups: White 7 (28%), Hispanic 7 (28%),

African American 6 (24%), Asian 1 (4 %), Mixed Race 1 (4%), Not Specified 3 (12%). In

Table 1, the age categories were as follows:

Table 1

Age N =25

Age	N	Percent
18-21	7	28%
22-25	4	16%
26-29	3	12%
30-33	2	.08%
38-41	1	.04%
42-45	1	.04%
46-49	2	.08%
50 and older	5	20%

Data Collection

Data were collected in March 2016 from a Western private career college. All but

demographic data were collected on the last day of the nine-week term. Demographic data

were collected at the beginning of the course. The school's registrar provided descriptive

statistics on demographics for the classes participating in the curriculum. Data included

gender, race, and age. Students were enrolled in foundational courses over a nine-week

term that placed an emphasis on positive psychology.

The Authentic Happiness Scale (Peterson, 2005) and the Satisfaction with Life

Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) were administered pre and post

course. The researcher-designed Likert-scale was administered post course only on the last

day of the course. The Likert-scale measured the extent to which the students felt they had

accomplished their academic, social, and personal goal: (1) *not at all*, (2) *not too much*, (3)

to some extent, and (4) *to a great extent*. Journals pertaining to classroom and homework

assignments as well as the final reflection regarding the course were collected the last day

of class. Students engaged in positive psychology activities such as the counting blessings

exercise, gratitude letter, and random acts of kindness each week of the 9-week course.

Students reflected in their journals regarding the impact these exercises had on their daily

lives and well-being. The students' journals were collected the last day of class.

Data for an ($N = 25$) were collected for the Authentic Happiness Scale (Peterson,

2005), Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985),

Values in Action-Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004), and journal

entries containing classroom and homework assignments. Six students did not attend the

last day of class; therefore, data with an ($N = 19$) were collected for the Likert-scale. The

professor teaching the courses supervised data collection.

The Walden IRB approved data collection on December 12, 2015 (approval

number: 12-09-15-0173497). No new data were collected prior to the approval date. All

data were de-identified and given a unique identifier in order to maintain anonymity of the

students. No information was shared outside the professor teaching the courses and me.

Data were collected on hard copy with no electronic transmission. Data were then stored

and locked in a closet. Data were then entered into SPSS and Excel, guarded by the

password of my personal computer. Data represented students enrolled in the January term:

January 6-March 2, 2016.

Data were recorded in the online discussion atom of the course. The professor

teaching the course copied and compiled the students' responses, de-identified, and

assigned a unique identifier for each student in order to compile student responses for each

student while protecting the confidentiality of the students. Students turned in hand-written

responses in hard-copy form. The professor de-identified and created a unique identifier

regarding these responses. The pre and post responses to the Authentic Happiness Survey

(Peterson, 2005), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, &

Griffin, 1985) were placed in on a spreadsheet. Students' responses were de-identified and

given a unique identifier. Students answered questions regarding the research questions in a

final reflection, as well as responded to a Likert-scale as to how they felt they had

accomplished their academic, social, and personal goals. The students' responses were de-

identified and a unique identifier was assigned to each student in order to protect

confidentiality and compile responses by each student for analysis. All data were compiled

by the professor and presented to me.

Data Analysis

The research questions were addressed with a sample of ($N = 25$) nontraditional

students in a Western career college using descriptive statistics, paired samples t-tests,

correlation analyses, Cohen's *d*, and Likert-scales using frequency tables used for quantitative analysis. Qualitative analyses of themes and key quotations as a means of demonstration of the effects of the curriculum were assessed to report on well-being and goal attainment. This addressed the students' assessment of overall well-being using the Authentic Happiness Scale (Peterson, 2005) and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Secondly, goal attainment was measured using Likert scales and then recorded in frequency tables. Thirdly, qualitative analyses were determined by recurrent themes found in the students' journals, homework and classroom exercises, and final reflections.

<center>Qualitative Analysis</center>

The researcher read through the journal entries and classroom assignments and determined themes from the students' responses, which were frequently described in their journal entries and final reflections at the end of the course. They were highlighted, annotated, and coded. Words and phrases were then categorized as concepts and themes that arose from the qualitative data, following procedures recommended by Braun and Clarke (2006). Specific words that were coded involved the following: achieving goals, positive attitude, determination, learning new things, accomplishment, self-knowledge/self-awareness, positive, better communicator, thankful, helping/help, blessings, grateful/gratitude, feeling good, support, and kindness.

Two areas of discrepancy involved a student stating that she had not quite accomplished all of her goals, and another student stating that this was just a refresher course on what he already knew.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

The research questions for the quantitative analyses are as follows:

RQ1: Is the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum (independent variable) in a foundational class of nontraditional students associated with attainment of academic, social, or personal goals (dependent variable)?

H^1_0: A majority of students will not report goal attainment.

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is not associated with the attainment of goals.

H^1_A: A majority of students will report goal attainment.

The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is associated with the attainment of goals.

RQ2: Is the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being?

H^2_0: $\mu_1-\mu_2 = 0$ The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is not associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being.

H^2_A: $\mu_1-\mu_2 \neq 0$ The implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is associated with improvement in self-reported measures of well-being.

The quantitative analysis of this research study involved an ($N = 25$) of

nontraditional career college students who took a pre and post-test of the Satisfaction with

Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) and the Authentic

Happiness Scale (Peterson, 2005) as well as a researcher-designed post-test Likert scale

concerning the students' assessment of goal attainment.

The pair-wise samples t tests indicate that for an ($N = 25$) students, the mean

difference score for the post-pre-test for the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener,

Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) was not significant with $p < .01$, ($p = .139$). The mean

difference score for the post-pre-test for the Authentic Happiness Scale (Peterson, 2005)

was significant at $p < .05$, ($p = .046$).

Cohen's d indicated a medium effect regarding the pre and post means for the

Satisfaction with Life Scale (1985) with an effect size of (.22) and a medium effect of (.44)

for the Authentic Happiness Scale (2005). The pre-test indicated ($M = 23.04$) regarding the

Satisfaction with Life Scale (1985) and the post-test indicated ($M = 24.6$) as seen in Figure

1. The pre-test indicated ($M = 3.08$) for the Authentic Happiness Scale (2005) and the post-

test indicated ($M = 3.4$) as seen in Figure 2. Therefore, regarding the hypothesis of RQ2,

H^2_A: μ_1-$\mu_2 \neq 0$, it can be concluded that the implementation of a positive psychology

curriculum in a foundational class of nontraditional students is associated with

improvement in self-reported measures of well-being.

Table 2

Paired samples t test for post and pre-test of Satisfaction with Life Scale

	M	*SD*	*SE* of mean	95% confidence interval of the	*t*	*df*	Sig. (2-tailed)

| | M | SD | SE of mean | 95% confidence interval of the difference | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
				lower	upper			
Pair 1 SWLS Post-Pre	1.560	5.100	1.020	-.545	3.665	1.530	24	.139

Table 3

Paired samples t test Authentic Happiness Survey

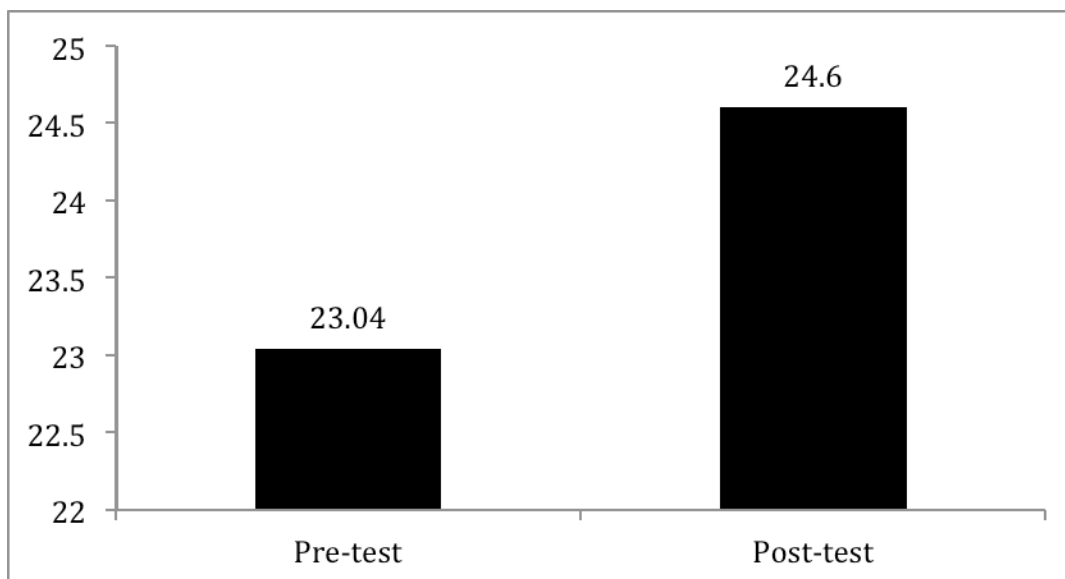| Pair 2 AHS Post-Pre | M | SD | SE of mean | 95% confidence interval of the difference | | t | df | Sig. (2-tailed) |
				lower	upper			
	.333	.797	.159	.006	.664	2.102	24	.046

Figure 1. Mean scores on Satisfaction with Life Scale
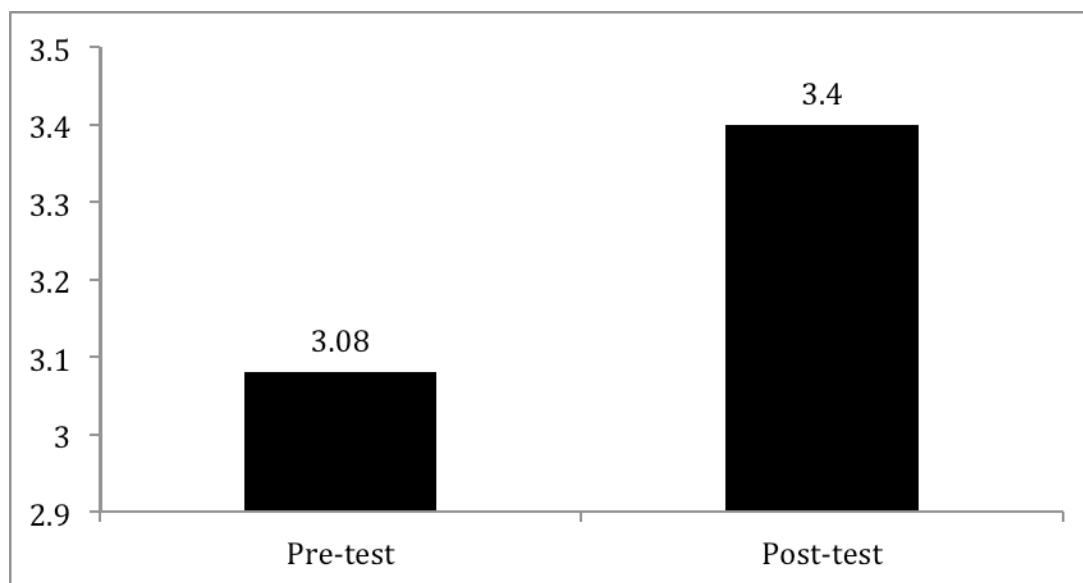
Figure 2. Mean Score on Authentic Happiness Survey

Another of the quantitative measures to assess goal attainment in this study

involved the students responding to a researcher-designed Likert-scale, post-course,

answering the following questions:

Over the past nine weeks of this course, to what extent have you accomplished the

academic goal you defined for yourself at the beginning of the course:

1 = not at all
2 = not too much
3 = to some extent
4 = to a great extent

Of the ($N = 25$) population of students, an ($N = 19$) responded to the extent that they

accomplished their goal. Regarding the academic goal attainment, 6 of the 19 (31.2%)

stated that they had achieved their goal *to a great extent.* Thirteen of the 19 (68.4 %) stated

that they had achieved their goal *to some extent.* None answered *not too much or not at all.*

Over the past nine weeks of this course, to what extent have you accomplished the

social goal you defined for yourself at the beginning of the course:

> 1 = not at all
> 2 = not too much
> 3 = to some extent
> 4 = to a great extent

Table 4

Likert-Scale Student Response to Attainment of Academic Goal N = 19

Response	N	Percent
1 = not at all	0	0%
2 = not too much	0	0%
3 = to some extent	13	68.4%
4 = to a great extent	6	31.6%

Regarding the social goal attainment, five of the 19 (26%) stated that they had

achieved their social goal *to a great extent.* Twelve of the 19 (63.1 %) stated that they had

achieved their goal *to some extent.* Two of the 19 (10.5 %) stated that they had achieved

their goal *not too much.* None answered *not at all.*

Over the past 9 weeks of this course, to what extent have you accomplished the

personal goal you defined for yourself at the beginning of the course:

> 1 = not at all
> 2 = not too much
> 3 = to some extent
> 4 = to a great extent

Table 5

Likert Scale Student Response to Attainment of Social Goal, N = 19

Response	N	Percent
1 = *not at all*	0	0%
2 = *not too much*	2	26%
3 = *to some extent*	12	63.2%
4 = *to a great extent*	5	10.5%

Regarding the personal goal attainment, eight of the 19 (42.1 %) stated that they had achieved their goal *to a great extent.* Nine of the 19 (47.4 %) stated that they had achieved their goal *to some extent.* Two of the 19 (10.5%) stated that they had achieved their goal *not too much.* None answered *not at all.* The majority of students indicated that they had met their goals to some extent or to a great extent. Thus, students expressed relatively positive opinions about their experience with the course.

Table 6

Likert Scale Student Response to Attainment of Personal Goal N = 19

Response	N	Percent
1 = not at all	0	0%
2 = not too much	2	10.5%
3 = to some extent	9	47.4%
4 = to a great extent	8	42.1%

Therefore, regarding RQ1, the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum (independent variable) in a foundational course of nontraditional students, a majority of students reported that they had attained academic, social, and personal goals.

Qualitative Analysis

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), "thematic analysis is a method of identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within data" (p. 6). When analyzing qualitative data, the thematic analysis is not a "free-for-all" with the interpretation of the data left solely to the researcher's discretion. Themes must clearly identify the patterns that the research questions are seeking to define as evidence for or against the hypotheses. Therefore, careful and meticulous coding must be conducted when one is using qualitative interpretation as a means of analysis in a research study. Words were codified and counted as to how many times they were present in the students' journals. These are represented in the Table 7.

Table 7

Codification of Words and Terms Evident in Journals and Letters

Words Coded in Journals	Number of Responses
Thankful/Thank/Thanks	47
Achieving Goals	18
Helping/Helped/Helpful	17
Accomplishment	14
Positive Attitude	11
Self-Knowledge/Self-Awareness	11

Blessings	10
Appreciation	8
Feeling Good	8
Positive	8
Happy	7
Grateful	6
Learning New Things	6
Better Communicator	5
Determination	5
Kindness/Kind	5
Support	5

I quantified the presence of certain terms and extrapolated meaning regarding the guiding question: Do students report positive social and learning experiences with the course, as evidenced by qualitative analysis of journals, reflections, and written class assignments?

One could interpret that the words and terms in Table 7 are indicative of the students reporting positive social and learning experiences as was evidenced from their journals, reflections, and written class assignments. Such words as "thankful", "achieving goals", "helping/helpful", "accomplishment", "positive attitude", and "self-awareness/self-knowledge" all indicate positive social and learning experiences.

One of the goals of this study was to determine, qualitatively, if students experienced increased well-being as a result of taking a foundational course with an emphasis in positive psychology.

Students were assigned three positive psychology exercises during their foundational course of study. Various themes regarding gratitude, positive effect, healing of relationships, health, feeling good, sense of well-being, and goal accomplishment fell under these categories: Count your blessings exercise, writing a gratitude letter, and performing random acts of kindness.

<div align="center">Count Your Blessings</div>

The count your blessings exercise required students to count their blessings in their lives once a week. The students recorded in a journal what they were grateful for in their lives. Themes that arose from the students counting their blessing involved: (a) gratitude for spouses and family members; (b) gratitude for friends; c) gratitude for good health; (d) gratitude for employment; (e) gratitude for food on the table; and (f) gratitude for the opportunity to return to school. Students wrote regarding family:

- I am thankful for such a wonderful family. (P1)

- I am thankful for my grandma. (P2)

- I am thankful for my son being alive and well, although he is going through personal trials. I am also thankful that even though it has been an emotional roller coaster for me, I am finding the strength to hold on. (P3)

- I am thankful that I have someone in my life who is ready to stand by me through thick and thin. (P4)

Students wrote regarding friends:

- I am thankful for having a supportive girlfriend. (P10)

- I am thankful for having such great friends. (P5)

- I am thankful for a very good friend of mine that I came in contact with whom I haven't heard from in seven years. (P6)

Students wrote regarding good health:

- I am thankful for good health, good friends, and family I can rely on in times of need. (P1)

- My health, because last year on Thanksgiving Day, I got very sick and I was in the hospital on and off. The doctors told my mom that I didn't have much time to live and a year later, I am still here. (P7)

- Our health and wellbeing; the fact that my family and I are healthy means a lot to me. My sister was very ill around this time of year and my son was also diagnosed with high blood pressure; just knowing everyone is here and ok is the biggest blessing of all. (P1)

- I count my blessings for being a healthy, able-bodied man with two eyes to see a pretty woman, and two ears to listen to my kids try to explain their way out of trouble, and two feet to walk on the days when the Nissan wouldn't start, and a nose to smell the good food that I be cooking, and a mouth to make people laugh, a heart that beats every day, and I am grateful for my two hands that let me play my guitars that help me keep it all in perspective. (P4)

Students wrote regarding employment:

- I am thankful for the work I do so I can help others as the needs arise. (P9)

- Finally, my job, because my job wasn't the greatest last year. I was getting paid very little and this year it's a lot better. (P8)

- Facebook pays me for advertising products in my page. So I am so excited to be able to work while I'm in my home publishing my own stuff in the Internet. (P10)

Students wrote regarding going back to school:

- I was thankful that I was able to go back to school and further my education. (P11)

- I'm thankful for the school, and the fact that I am actually getting educated. (P12)

- I think my second blessing is me starting school this year. It's something that I wanted to do for a long time but just wasn't able to, and I consider this a blessing. (P13)

- My wife motivates me to the fullest, and she is the reason that I am back in school now. She's my best friend and protector. (P14)

- I count my blessings every day. I don't have everything I want right now, but those things are coming; because since enrolling in school, I know I am about to start moving on up like George and Weezy. I do, however, have a lot of things that money can't buy. My optimism and integrity are just a couple of those things. (P4)

When students were asked to recall and count their blessings, this brought about a feeling of gratitude and well-being. According to Emmons (2007), maintaining a gratitude journal in which one counts one's blessings has a positive effect regarding one's well-being. Fredrickson (2009) noted that study participants who counted their blessings increased their positivity (p. 187).

The gratitude letter involved the student writing a letter of gratitude to someone who has contributed greatly to her/his life. The student then delivered the letter in person. Themes involved: (a) positive effect writing and delivering the letter had on the student; (b) positive effect the receiver of the letter experienced; (c) the strengthening of the relationship between the giver and the receiver of the gratitude letter; and (d) healing aspect of the relationship between the giver and the receiver of the gratitude letter. Students wrote regarding the gratitude letter:

- I wrote the letter to my mom. When she got the letter in the mail and she read it, she called and told me it made her day. She was really happy because of the things I told her. I felt really great making my mom feel good of all the things she has done for us. Sometimes it is a good thing to let your mom know how much you appreciate her. (P16)

- I wrote a letter to one of my relatives in my family. I printed out the letter, and I was present while she read it. She cried and made me cry. I have never felt like this before; it was a warm feeling and I felt as if in that moment, everything was okay. No obstacle in this world mattered in those moments. My aunt gave me a hug and held me for a strong while. I am happy that I got to do this and I am so glad. (P17)

- The gratitude letter that I wrote was to my grandfather. The purpose of my letter to him was for being a good example of good, strong work ethics and for caring enough to be the only male in my life that sat me down to talk about life and things. I observed gratitude and appreciation from him and it was unexpected because everyone in the family goes to him for everything and no one actually thanks him.

So I felt really appreciated for acknowledging all that he has done. After seeing his reaction, I felt satisfied and privileged for acknowledging what he means to me. (P18)

- I wrote a nice, personal letter to my older sister Jackie who I live with; she's been very helpful since I moved out here. Wrote the letter and then left it on her dresser in her room. She came in and saw the letter and when she read it, I could see her eyes watering up. So she was reading, I could see a little grin every couple of seconds. I could tell she was feeling very special. After she read the letter that I gave her, she gave me a big hug and told me I was the best little sister ever. I felt good after writing the letter because the reaction I got from my older sister was absolutely amazing. I felt like that the letter I gave my sister brightened up her day so much. (P19)

- As Ricky read my letter to him, all I saw was a big smile, shaking his head. He turned a bit red, LOL. But he turned to me and said, 'You deserve to be loved, not torn down. All people see is your skin pigmentation; they don't see you as I do. I will always be there for you. As for school, it's your time to do you and get the education you put on hold because you made sure your kids was through school and they didn't need for nothing. So March 2017 is your goal. We're here together.' (P20)

Seligman (2011) stated that gratitude can make one's life happier and more satisfying, as well as strengthen relationships. This is evident in the journal reflections that

the students wrote regarding the gratitude letter exercise. This enhanced their overall well-being.

<div align="center">Random Acts of Kindness</div>

The random acts of kindness exercise required the student to perform random acts of kindness one-to-five times per week. These activities were as simple as opening a door for another person, paying for someone's coffee in line at a coffee shop, to buying food to feed several homeless people at random locations.

Regarding the random acts of kindness, themes that arose involved: (a) positive effect the act of kindness had on the student performing the act; (b) positive effect the act of kindness had on the receiver of the act; (c) the experience of broaden-and build (acts of kindness began to broaden and build into larger and more frequent acts of kindness as the positive effect increased sense of well-being and happiness); and (d) students began to seek out opportunities to perform an act of kindness toward a person in need, thereby increasing awareness of someone who needed help. Students wrote:

- I was at a gas station and an elderly lady was very lost and the attendant didn't speak English very well. I proceeded to take an extra five-to-ten minutes out of my day to locate the address she was going to in my GPS, writing down for her and pointing out which way she needed to go. She then called me a saint which made me proceed in saying, 'I'm no saint; just a person with a few moments to spare.' (P21)

- I bought 30 spicy chicken sandwiches from McDonald's and gave them to 30 different hungry homeless people. I helped a disabled person into his van and got in

his wheelchair as well. Whenever I find an opportunity to help someone, I do it right away because it is actually the thing that makes me the happiest and makes people think there is still humanity in some people. I give love to everybody that deserves it, and if you try and smile, most of the time, the life will smile back. (P4)

- The first random act of kindness I performed was giving away a $25.00 King Soopers (grocery store) gift card given to me by my church. It made me feel very good. (P22)

- We bought a little boy (age 4) a coat, gloves, and beanie. It felt very good knowing that angel of a little boy had a coat and will be warm whenever he is out and about with his mom. (P1)

- I invited a friend of mine who is going through a difficult time out to breakfast. I felt very satisfied to be able to give my friend that sigh of relief by inviting her to breakfast and giving her a break from the difficult moment she was going through. (P23)

- To show my appreciation, I did the dishes as an act of kindness. Also, during the break, I gave money to a man in a parking lot with his dog. He didn't ask for it; I just pulled up and gave him a few dollars and six cigarettes. A third thing I did was listen to a homeless man who just wanted to talk. It was cold, and I couldn't do anything else for him, but I could tell that he was happy that I was having a conversation with him. I felt good about doing these things. The man made me feel especially good because he said, 'Nobody ever just comes up and offers money.' He

was grateful (more so because I cared and not for the money) and it was my

pleasure. (P24)

- One night upon leaving the school there was a student walking out the same doors

    as myself with a pan of water in his hand. I asked what it was for and he said it was

    for his car, to put in instead of coolant. I then gave him a bottle I had in my car. I

    think he almost had a mild stroke, not only because I gave it to him, but because I

    had it with me, and I didn't want anything in return for it. (P25)

<div align="center">Goal Attainment</div>

The act of creating and accomplishing an academic, social, and/or personal goal

involved both qualitative and quantitative measurement. The qualitative aspect involved

students' written reflective responses as to how they felt about the degree in which they

accomplished their self-selected goals.

Themes that arose out of goal attainment involved: (a) reaching full potential in the

students' academics; (b) the ability to overcome obstacles; (c) the utilization of the top five

character strengths to achieve academic, social, and personal goals; (d) thinking positively

about challenges in life; (e) increased self-awareness and self-esteem; (f) application

toward future goals. Students wrote:

- Well, this course helped me reach my full potential in academics. Thanks to the

    teacher pushing me to work hard and me taking advantage of the resources

    available, I was able to achieve greater heights! (P24)

- I think I was able to achieve my goal. I did talk to new people when I normally do

    not do a lot of talking at work. I like to come in and get my work done before I

leave for the night. I listened to others in a new way. I asked questions to show I was listening to them. I also showed acts of kindness by buying some treats and sharing them with the people around me. (P23)

- This course actually helped me to know I can achieve anything I set my mind to do. This could only happen through managing my time wisely, talking to the right people, and determination to succeed. (P21)

- I had been working on Monday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. I really didn't have much time to worry about school. I was either at home or at work (when I say home, I mean asleep). So when told I am failing a class, without hesitation, I put my two weeks in. No job is more important than my education. School always comes first. When I told my bosses, I explained that to them. I am glad they understood. So right now I am home, working on school, and on my free time, I am looking for a different job and one closer to home. (P10)

- Positive psychology can be applied in every aspect of my life, including my short and long-term goals. To think positive, is to receive a positive outcome, eventually, through hard work. (P7)

- The goal I chose was humor and playfulness, and I honestly love this goal. I have always been one to be laughing constantly, but now it is an every minute kind of thing. The goal that I had set for myself was that I would laugh a lot more and smile a lot more even when I was having a horrible day. Now I walk around with a smile on my face every single day! I talk to everyone and try to make every person I talk to smile if it is in my reach. I love how I can go through the day without getting

mad over little things or how I can get along with everyone without being quiet or

isolating myself from new people. I tell myself every day before I walk out the door

that I am going to smile or make someone smile even if I'm having a rough day.

My days got easier and a whole lot more positive. It's amazing! (P1)

Students wrote a reflective piece regarding the following research question:

Guiding Question 1: What have you discovered, if anything, about yourself by

writing reflective journal responses to the course material and Peterson's (2006) *A primer

in positive psychology*? Students wrote:

- I wrote a gratitude letter to my manager who has been an instrumental figure in my

  life and to my surprise, she told me she had seen some qualities in me that brought

  her closer to me in order to make sure I am on the right track to success. She even

  offered to coach me in an issue relating to management. (P8)

- I have discovered that writing reflective journal responses help me express my

  opinion, and it gives me a chance to work on writing my thoughts out on paper.

  (P9)

- That I am capable of accomplishing small tasks that reinforce my good side. (P11)

- I have found that I can put forth the effort to be more truthful about myself, but it

  can be a struggle at times. (P23)

- What I discovered is once you are nice to other people and once you help others

  out, everyone's in a good mood. (P25)

- I learned to start looking towards my future. (P15)

Students responded to the following reflective question:

Guiding Question Number 2: To what extent, if at all, do you feel you have accomplished your goal academically, socially, or personally as a result of taking a foundational course with an emphasis in positive psychology? Students wrote:

- I feel I have accomplished a bit more positive outcomes with school, my daughter, family, friends, and my church as a result of thinking better and with a "seize the day" type of attitude. (P1)

- Academically, I'm just glad to be passing all my classes this term because it started off somewhat overwhelming. Socially and personally, I'm a lot more open and not so reserved. (P23)

- Passing with distinction and making the best of whatever I learned this term was my ultimate goal. I believe I was able to do that by following all of the three steps through proper time management, making sure all assignments were done, and a positive attitude towards learning. (P8)

In the final reflection regarding the foundational course with an emphasis in positive psychology, students responded to the following question regarding their ability to attain their academic, social, and personal goal: Were there any other specific positive psychology exercises or course content that you felt had a particularly noticeable effect on your being able to attain the goals you set? Please elaborate. Students wrote:

- The frequent mentioning of goals did seem to increase my focus and attention. (P8)

- Writing my goals kept me strong throughout this course. (P9)

- It was a very positive experience that helped me through some obligations. (P21)

- I was able to see and feel it regarding my personal goal. (P24)

- The communications exercise helped me a lot outside the course, so for that I am

  very thankful. (P8)

Evidence of Trustworthiness

For the qualitative portion of this research study, I consulted with the professor

teaching the course, as needed, in order to interpret the qualitative data. I did not teach the

course. I did not collect the students' journals until the end of the course. For the

quantitative portion of the research study, the survey results from the websites were

recorded in the students' journals, and the professor teaching the course cross-referenced

for accurate recording of these data. I did not collect the data for the quantitative portion of

the research study until the end of the course.

Summary

The research questions for this study were in search for an answer to the hypothesis

which stated that the implementation of positive psychological constructs in a foundational

course of nontraditional students would assist students in attaining academic, social, and

personal goals, as well as enhance overall well-being. The mixed methods study provided a

research mechanism that would bear out both quantitative measurement and self-reported

qualitative assessment as to the effects of the incorporation of positive psychology into the

students' coursework.

Regarding RQ1, students reported that they attained their academic goals *to some*

extent, (68.4%) and *to a great extent* (31.6%) with 0% in the categories of *not at all* or *not*

so much. Regarding their social goals, students reported that they had attained their goals,

not so much (26%), *to some extent* (63%), and *to a great extent* (10.5%) with 0% in the

category of *not at all*. Concerning their personal goals, students reported that they had

attained their goals *not so much* (10.5%), *to some extent*, (47.4%) and *to a great extent*

(42.1%), with 0% in the category of *not at all*. Given the student responses, a majority of

students reported goal attainment.

The quantitative analysis of RQ2 regarding well-being was tested using a paired

samples *t* test to assess the significance of changes from pre-to-post-test assessment. The

results of these analyses indicated a significant and positive change in student reports of

authentic happiness ($t = 2.102$, $p < .05$), and a positive, non-significant change in the

SWLS ($t = 1.530$, $p = .139$).

For the qualitative analysis of guiding question 1, students reported positive social

and learning experiences as evidenced by themes regarding the count your blessings

exercises as: (a) gratitude for spouses and family members; (b) gratitude for friends; (c)

gratitude for good health; (d) gratitude for employment; (e) gratitude for food on the table;

and (f) gratitude for the opportunity to return to school. Other themes regarding the

gratitude letter included: (a) positive effect writing and delivering the letter had on the

student; (b) Positive effect the receiver of the letter experienced; (c) the strengthening of

the relationship between the giver and the receiver of the gratitude letter; and (d) healing

aspect of the relationship between the giver and the receiver of the gratitude letter.

Additional themes regarding random acts of kindness involved: (a) positive effect

the act of kindness had on the student performing the act; (b) positive effect the act of

kindness had on the receiver of the act; (c) the experience of broaden-and build (acts of

kindness began to broaden-and-build into larger and more frequent acts of kindness as the

positive effect increased sense of well-being and happiness); and (d) students began to seek out opportunities to perform an act of kindness toward a person in need, thereby increasing awareness of someone who needed help. All of these themes are indicative of the students reporting on positive social and learning experiences as a result of taking a foundational course with an emphasis on positive psychology and engaging in positive psychology constructs. Guiding question 4 will be addressed in Chapter 5 regarding interpretations, implications, and future study.

Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

Introduction

A mixed methods study teaching positive psychology constructs in a foundational class of nontraditional adult learners in a career college was investigated to determine if these constructs increased well-being and assisted in the attainment of academic, social, and personal goals. Qualitative measures were assessed through students' journals, which contained classroom and homework assignments, and personal reflections. Students' responses were coded for emergent themes about well-being and the students' perceptions of their attainment of academic, social, and personal goals. Quantitative measures were assessed through surveys to determine character strengths using the Values in Action-Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Seligman & Peterson, 2004). Measurements of student well-being were assessed through the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985), and the Authentic Happiness Survey (Peterson, 2005). I created a Likert-scale as a post-assessment to measure the students' perception of the attainment of their academic, social, and personal goals.

The research question in this study was: Is exposure to a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational course of nontraditional students associated with positive, academic, social, or personal goals as evidenced in qualitative and quantitative data from surveys, student reflections, instructor reports, and improvement in self-reported authentic happiness? The conclusion was as follows: The study indicated that the application of positive psychology helped students achieve their goals and helped improve their overall well-being by using their character strengths to achieve academic, social, and personal goals. This, in turn, helped create positive social change in academia by enriching the lives of students and enhancing their collegiate experience. Therefore, this study of nontraditional students—an underrepresented collegiate population—could inform future research using similar positive psychology constructs to assist students in accomplishing academic, social, and personal goals, enhance subjective well-being, and aid in retention and in the completion of studies.

This chapter will interpret the findings, discuss the limitations of the study, give recommendations for future research, and determine the study's implications for positive social change in academia.

Interpretation of the Findings

Positive psychology constructs have been implemented in academic settings from grammar school to graduate school (Allen, 2011; Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005; Rogato, 2009, Seligman, 2011). However, the gap in the literature involved the psychological study of nontraditional adult learners, the fastest growing population in colleges and universities today (Scott & Lewis, 2011). These psychological studies have involved the use of positive

psychology in the classroom (Allen, 2011). Other studies have focused on goal attainment in the college environment (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010). Studies have also investigated the challenges of the nontraditional student (Exposito & Bernheimer, 2012; Horn, 1996). The purpose of this study was to determine if using positive psychology in foundational courses of nontraditional college students could help them attain academic, social, and personal goals as well as enhance their overall well-being.

Allen's (2011) study confirmed that positive psychology did enhance students' overall feeling of efficacy regarding their ability to effect change in themselves and in their communities. Allen (2011) stated that one element which was missing in her research was the setting and attainment of a goal. In this research study, the setting and attainment of an academic, social, and personal goal was key to determining if students, through the use of positive psychology, could increase self-efficacy through goal attainment in their foundational courses, and enhance their sense of well-being. The quantitative measures of this study indicated that students were able to accomplish their academic goals *to some extent*, (68.4%) and *to a great extent* (31.6%). The attainment of academic goals is a necessary component concerning college retention rates (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010). Similarly, regarding social goals, students reported goal attainment in this area as *not so much* (26%), *to some extent* (63%) and *to a great extent* (10.5%). Zero percent reported *not at all*. The attainment of social goals enhances the college experience, especially amongst nontraditional students who often do not feel a vital part of their college campuses due to the demands of family, spouses, and full-time workloads. This increases the likelihood of college retention and overall sense of belongingness on the college

campus (Goncalves & Trunk, 2014; Horn, 1996). Finally, regarding the attainment of personal goals, students reported that they had attained their goals *not so much* (10.5%), *to some extent*, (47.4%) and *to a great extent* (42.1%), with (0%) in the category of *not at all*. The pursuance and achievement of personal goals is key in academic settings (Morisano, Hirsh, Peterson, Pihl, & Shore, 2010; Senko, Hulleman, & Harackiewicz, 2001).

Qualitatively, students also reported on goal attainment. Students wrote:

- I feel I have accomplished a bit more positive outcomes with school, my daughter, family, friends, and my church as a result of thinking better and with a "seize the day" type of attitude. (P1)

- Academically, I'm just glad to be passing all my classes this term because it started off somewhat overwhelming. Socially and personally, I'm a lot more open and not so reserved. (P23)

- Passing with distinction and making the best of whatever I learned this term was my ultimate goal. I believe I was able to do that by following all of the three steps through proper time management, making sure all assignments were done, and a positive attitude towards learning. (P8)

- Positive psychology can be applied in every aspect of my life, including my short and long-term goals. To think positive, is to receive a positive outcome, eventually, through hard work. (P7)

These statements indicate that students felt a sense of accomplishment regarding their goals, and that positive psychology constructs were instrumental in the attainment of their goals.

A precept in positive psychology is to increase well-being. This study had students identify their character strengths in order to attain goals and to increase their overall well-being. Students engaged in positive psychology exercises such as the count your blessings exercise, gratitude letter, and random acts of kindness exercise. These exercises were designed to increase the individual's satisfaction with life as well as authentic happiness. The quantitative results of this study indicate that there was no significant change from pre-to-post-test regarding satisfaction with life (t =1.530, df = 24, p = .139), but there was a significant change regarding student assessment of authentic happiness (t = 2.102, df = 24, p = .046). Regarding the mean differences of the pre and post-test of the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985) there was no significant change observed in this measure. However, there was a significant change observed in student ratings on the Authentic Happiness Survey (Peterson, 2005) with the pretest measuring at (M = 3.08, SD = .84) and the post-test measuring at (M = 3.4, SD = .68), (t = 2.102, df = 24, p = .046). Given that the students were told that their college was being taken over by another university during this term and that they would have to make a decision to transition to the new university or change to another college, this may have affected satisfaction with life, but not with one's overall authentic happiness. As Lyubomirksy (2007) has stated, "In my interviews and experiments with very happy people, I've even found a few who remain happy or are able to recover their happiness fairly quickly after tragedies or major setbacks" (p. 28). This is because we all have a happiness set point, which originates from our biological parents, which serves as a baseline for happiness (Lyubomirsky, 2007, p. 21). Therefore, a possible explanation as to

why the students' authentic happiness was not affected by the changes in the college is that individuals have a tendency to bounce back from setbacks and tragedy.

In addition to the quantitative data, the qualitative data indicated that students experienced satisfaction with life and authentic happiness by conducting the positive psychology exercises of counting their blessings, writing a gratitude letter, and performing random acts of kindness. This was indicative in the student journal entries when they stated that not only did they feel good and experience a great level of benevolent satisfaction regarding the acts that they were performing, but they also made an emotional impact on the receivers of the acts. As a result of their experiences with these exercises, students' self-reports on the effects of these positive psychology constructs indicate an overall sense of well-being and satisfaction with life because of the responses they received from the people and lives they affected.

As stated earlier in this research study, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1990, 1996) concerning flow, often one is engaged in a creative endeavor in which the intrinsic reward of being involved in the activity is reward in and of itself. It does not require any extrinsic motivator. To be in a state of flow is to be experiencing the highest level of happiness. When students were asked to do a random act of kindness several times a week, this required a selfless act of creativity on their part. They found that the reward was not extrinsic, but intrinsic. The act of kindness and the good that it brought to other people was the reward in and of itself. This, in turn, increased an overall sense of well-being for not only the giver, but also the receiver of the act.

In order to flourish and experience satisfaction with life and authentic happiness, Seligman (2011) stated that individuals must experience positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). These positive psychology exercises help the students experience PERMA, therefore increasing their overall sense of well-being and accomplishment. As students practiced these exercises, they were encouraged to do even more. This supports Fredrickson's and Branigan's (2005) research that positive acts tend to broaden and build one's thought-action repertoires, and increase one's sense of happiness and well-being because positive acts make one want to create even more positive acts. A students wrote:

- What I discovered is once you are nice to other people and once you help others out, everyone's in a good mood. (P25)

Peterson and Seligman (2004) created a list of the 24 character strengths of psychologically healthy individuals. As mentioned earlier in this study, these include: wisdom (creativity, curiosity, open-mindedness, love of learning, perspective); courage (bravery, persistence, industriousness, integrity, authenticity, honesty, vitality, zest, enthusiasm); humanity (love, kindness, generosity, nurturance, social intelligence (emotional, personal); justice (citizenship, social responsibility, loyalty, teamwork, fairness, leadership); temperance (forgiveness, mercy, humility, modesty, prudence, self-regulation); and transcendence (appreciation of beauty and excellence, gratitude, hope, optimism, humor, and spirituality). When the students identified their top character strengths, they used these to conduct their classroom and homework exercises as well as accomplish their goals. This brought about a sense of well-being and accomplishment and

gave the students tools to use in their daily lives. Students exhibited creativity, open-mindedness, perspective, love of learning, persistence, integrity, authenticity, honesty, love, kindness, generosity, nurturance, social intelligence, social responsibility, gratitude, hope, optimism, humor, and spirituality. One student wrote:

- The goal I chose was humor and playfulness, and I honestly love this goal. I have always been one to be laughing constantly, but now it is an every minute kind of thing. The goal that I had set for myself was that I would laugh a lot more and smile a lot more even when I was having a horrible day. Now I walk around with a smile on my face every single day! I talk to everyone and try to make every person I talk to smile if it is in my reach. I love how I can go through the day without getting mad over little things or how I can get along with everyone without being quiet or isolating myself from new people. I tell myself every day before I walk out the door that I am going to smile or make someone smile even if I'm having a rough day. My days got easier and a whole lot more positive. It's amazing! (P1)

The mixed method design proved to be the best research method for this particular study in that the themes of the qualitative research helped to exemplify the impact the exercises had on the students participating in their foundational courses with an emphasis in positive psychology. The qualitative data allow the researcher to integrate rich description and first-hand accounts into quantitative findings and may also be hypothesis-generating as to the factors that are associated with positive changes (Sullivan, 2002). The quantitative aspect of the research did indicate significance regarding authentic happiness and overall well-being; however, satisfaction with life did not show significance in this

area. Given the transitional aspect of this particular term, one could interpret that the uncertainty of their educational future could have impacted their satisfaction with life. However, overall happiness may be a constant in anyone's life. Lyubomirsky (2007) stated that one's happiness is at a set point. Whether one wins the lottery or loses a limb, one's happiness goes back to a state of homeostasis. In order to cultivate happiness, an individual's life happiness involves the following: expressing gratitude, cultivating optimism, avoiding over-thinking, rumination, and social comparison, practicing acts of kindness, nurturing social relationships, developing coping strategies for stress, learning to forgive, increasing flow experiences, nurturing relationships, taking care of one's body and mind, practicing spirituality, savoring life's moments of pleasure, and committing to goals (Lyubomirsky, 2007). The positive psychology constructs and exercises conducted in these foundational courses assisted the students in accomplishing these aspects in the attainment of well-being, happiness, and goals.

Limitations to the Study

The limitations to this study involve the fact that the sample population consisted of an ($N = 25$) students from a private career college, and this is not large enough to generalize to a larger population.

A limitation mentioned earlier in this study involved any attrition that might occur during the course. No students dropped out of the course; however, six students did not show up the last day of class and did not complete the Likert-scale on goal attainment.

The results concerning goal attainment may have been different if these students reported that they had or had not accomplished their goals. Nineteen of the 25 answered the Likert-scale survey.

Recommendations

This study supported various aspects and theories of positive psychology. When the students identified their character strengths and set academic, social, and personal goals, they were able to accomplish them and experience goal attainment. Goal attainment is key to retention and success in college.

The exercises, count your blessings, gratitude letter, and random acts of kindness, helped to increase the students' overall sense of well-being regarding the results from the qualitative research methods and the quantitative Authentic Happiness Survey (Peterson, 2005).

Another important aspect of this research was to study and investigate the effects of positive psychological constructs with a nontraditional college population, as this was a gap in the psychological literature. Most psychological research is conducted with traditional students who are between the ages of 18 and 21 (Grohol, 2010). This study gave insight to the effects of positive psychology on a population of students that fell into the following criteria: (a) followed a nonlinear progression from high school to college, (b) have part-time or full-time jobs, (c) live with spouses or significant others, (d) have one or more children, (e) are first generation college students, (f) attained a GED as opposed to a high school diploma, and (g) are 25 years of age or older. The study of this college population gave insight as to how positive psychological constructs effect nontraditional students, who

are the fastest growing population on college and university campuses. The academic, social, personal, and psychological needs of the nontraditional college student are different from the traditional student in many areas, and this study was an attempt to address some of them.

In regard to future study in this area, researchers could study a larger population of nontraditional students. This research study involved a small sample, which cannot be generalizable to a larger college population. A larger sample may yield different results and inform psychologists and educators on a larger scale regarding this branch of psychology and its effects in academia.

Retention is still an issue on all college and university campuses, and the nontraditional student makes up a large portion of students who drop out due to the demand of jobs, spouses, and family. Future research could inform educators, researchers, administrators, and policy makers as to how to use positive psychology and goal-setting as a means to overcome these obstacles regarding a nontraditional population.

Implications for Positive Social Change

Positive psychology is one of the newest branches of psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). When I began this endeavor, there was very little research regarding the quantitative and qualitative evidence of positive psychology and its effects on nontraditional students regarding academic, social, and personal goal attainment. Seven years later, positive psychology has become more of a household word in the discipline of psychology as well as in lay circles of the population.

Positive psychology is inherent in the endeavors of positive social change. Seligman (2011) discovered that in order for people to flourish, rather than languish, individuals must experience positive emotion, engagement, relationship, meaning, and accomplishment. In the areas of academic endeavors, this research study has concluded that students, especially nontraditional students, must experience positive emotion through engagement with their faculty and peers. Given the demands of families, spouses, and jobs, nontraditional students must seek out the support of their families and significant others, as well as their faculty and peers. These relationships are key to their success. This support, through relationship, must not only be found on the campuses where they pursue their academic and career interests, but also at home. This was indicated in the qualitative research of this study. Meaning is accomplished when students pursue their academic, social, and personal goals. Once these goals are accomplished, the individual's overall sense of happiness and well-being is enhanced. As Pink (2009) stated, one is happy when one has a sense of purpose, mastery, and autonomy. These are some of the goals of higher education. Positive social change is accomplished when students accomplish their academic, social, and personal goals in higher education and take these skills into their careers and disciplinary fields. An individual's sense of well-being is enhanced when one is experiencing positive psychological outcomes with her/his academic, social, and personal endeavors. Guided question four stated: What lessons can be learned from the implementation of a positive psychology curriculum in a foundational course among nontraditional students that can inform future interventions?

The lessons that could be learned from this research are the importance of focusing on individuals' character strengths and utilizing those to accomplish academic, social, and personal goals. Human beings do not operate inside of a vacuum. In order for college students to be successful, they need to feel that they are accomplishing goals in their lives academically, socially, and personally. Future interventions could entail studying larger populations, as well as students in varied other courses besides the foundational courses of this study. Positive psychology could become a course in and of itself, as is the case in some universities in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.

This study used the positive psychological constructs of human character strengths, counting one's blessing, writing a gratitude letter, and practicing random acts of kindness to create an overall sense of well-being. The addition of creating an academic, social, and personal goal, and utilizing one's strengths was an additional research element designed to help the nontraditional student experience accomplishment in all arenas of his/her life. Future research could improve and have an impact on what traditional and nontraditional students could experience as they attain their various college diplomas and degrees. The mixed methods aspect of this study rendered qualitative and quantitative support of these endeavors. Positive psychology is about creating positive social change in the world.

Conclusion

Positive psychology is one of the newest branches of the field of psychology. Its roots started with the human potential movement with Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. Martin Seligman, Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi, Chris Peterson, Barbara Fredrickson, Sonja

Lyubomirsky, as well as many other researchers and theorists took up the torch and advanced the study of human character strengths and values in the areas of happiness and subjective well-being. Positive psychology has had an impact on various disciplines in clinical, counseling, academic, military, medical, business, and educational settings.

In regard to the educational setting, positive psychological constructs have been applied from grammar school environments to graduate school. An educational area that had not had much study and investigation was the career college that educates nontraditional students. Nontraditional students are the highest collegiate population on college campuses. The needs of the nontraditional students are different from traditional students in that their lives are much more demanding concerning families, spouses, and careers. These challenges warrant psychological interventions to help the nontraditional student retain their positions on their college campuses and become academically successful toward the ultimate goal of attaining their degrees and utilizing this knowledge in their chosen disciplines. These goals are academic, social, and personal in nature.

It was the purpose of this study to evaluate the impact of positive psychology curriculum on nontraditional college students taking foundational courses. Mixed methods were the chosen research design in that qualitative assessment would lend itself toward rich description of the college students' experiences. Quantitative assessment was chosen in that empirical evidence was also found to be a gap in the literature concerning positive psychology and the nontraditional student.

The implementation of the counting your blessings exercise, the gratitude letter, the random acts of kindness exercise, exercises from Peterson's (2006) *An introduction to*

positive psychology, and the setting of an academic, social, and personal goal were instrumental in studying the effectiveness of these interventions in helping the nontraditional student retain his/her college status and achieve academic success in his/her courses as well an enhance overall well-being in his/her collegiate experience and personal life.

The qualitative and quantitative assessment indicated that positive psychology implementation in a foundation course did have a positive impact. Students reported positive changes in their lives and the accomplishment of their self-selected academic, social, and personal goals. This also enhanced their overall sense of well-being. Future study in this arena will involve larger populations of college students and possibly other coursework besides foundational classes. This could, in turn, become a course in itself as has been demonstrated in schools and universities in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia.

Positive psychology is about creating positive social change in the world. By focusing on the character strengths and values of individuals, especially in the academic arena, this can have an impact on students' chosen fields of study, their careers, and their social and personal lives in general. This can then move out into the communities in which these students live, and eventually effect positive social change wherever positive psychology is taught and practiced. This research study was the beginning of this endeavor.

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Letter of Permission

Linda Newsted <lnewsted@psych.upenn.edu>
Oct 26

Hi again,

Your students may take each of those scales on the Authentic Happiness site.

Best regards,

Linda

Linda Newsted
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From: Linda Newsted [mailto:lnewsted@psych.upenn.edu] **Sent:** Monday, October 26, 2015 11:32 AM **To:** 'ruth.rhodes@gmail.com' **Subject:** Thank you for your call

Hello, Ruth,

Thank you for checking with us about using the three scales you mentioned.

Prof. Christopher Peterson's Authentic Happiness Inventory may be used online only.

The Satisfaction with Life Scale
http://internal.psychology.illinois.edu/~ediener/SWLS.html

The Values in Action Survey
http://www.viacharacter.org/www/Research/CollaborationsNEW

Sincerely,

Linda
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