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**THE POSITIVE TURN OF HIGHER EDUCATION----BASED ON THE  
PERSPECTIVE OF POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY**

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**Abstract**

The dynamic investigation of higher education, and evaluating the role of positive psychology in promoting student participation and organizational effectiveness, it is believed that a positive turn in higher education can help educators use positive attitudes to help students thrive in their personal and professional lives. Then, based on the PERMA happiness model, the idea of constructing a positive university is proposed.

**Keywords:** higher education, positive psychology, PERMA happiness model

**1. Introduction**

Since Benjamin Franklin in the 17th century and John Dewey in the late 19th century, educators have been focusing on the strengths of students. In the early 20th century, French psychologist Alfred Binet began using a model to test students' talents and strengths, rather than focusing on remedying problems. In the 1960s, Arthur Quakering emphasized that educators need to focus more on students' abilities rather than their defects. Today, education from the perspective of strengths includes measuring students' achievements and strengths as well as the determinants of positive outcomes<sup>[1]</sup>.

Around the same time as educators shifted to a development based on student strengths, institutions of higher education began to change their structures. Before the Second World War, in the late 1930s, higher education had a certain religious color, emphasized the development of moral quality, and was considered only applicable to the elite. In 1945, after the end of the Second World War, university enrollment continued to increase as G.I. Bill provided education funding for veterans. With the increasing diversity of student types, the scale of higher education institutions has expanded, and the responsibilities of teachers have become more professional.<sup>[2]</sup> Higher education institutions began to teach students a variety of professional skills to adapt to different vocational needs, which has undergone a huge change from previous educational concept that encouraged quality development.

As a result of this shift in higher education, student-centered education has become the focus of attention, and the design of cooperative curriculum is increasingly applicable to all types of students. Various colleges and universities have begun to provide new education courses and programs to attract more and more students. Private higher education institutions can provide more attractive speed-up courses or small class teaching than large public institutions. at the same time, private institutions have more autonomy in the admission process of their students. In order to imitate the success of private institutions, public institutions try to develop similar products, leading to fierce industry competition. Unfortunately, this dynamic competitive environment means that many institutions have shifted from being student-centered to profit-

driven, and education has become more of a commodity. As a result of this market-based change in education concepts, colleges and universities are increasingly focusing on ranking and reputation, rather than the development and success of students. This pursuit of rankings has led colleges and universities to invest more in infrastructure, rather than new projects that promote students' personal development.<sup>[3]</sup>

However, a growing number of researchers are beginning to suggest a return to merit-based education and student-centered development goals. It is not enough to expand existing educational programs and the diversity of higher education institutions still needs to be further explored. Returning to the basic educational purpose of helping students to think positively about their own advantages can expand the impact of higher education on the whole society. Through higher education, individuals can live a richer life and be prepared for "civic participation and productive work". As a powerful tool for higher education to promote student development, the application of positive psychology in colleges and university practice needs further research.

## **2. Positive psychology and higher education**

Martin Seligman, the father of the modern positive psychology movement, began aggressively promoting positive psychology when he was elected president of the American Psychological Association in 1998. However, this term actually originated from the book *Motivation and Personality* written by Abraham Maslow in 1954. On the basis of Maslow's research, Seligman believes that the focus of clinical psychology research has completely shifted to mental illness and drug treatment. He urged psychologists to shift their perspective and focus on scientific research on happiness, optimism and prosperity. Positive psychology is not limited to problem-solving research, but instead focuses on individuals and organizations building gratitude and developing strengths to help create a better life.<sup>[4]</sup>

Positive psychology emphasizes that the key to success is prosperity. Prosperity in higher education is defined as "all-round intellectual, social, and emotional investment in university experience." This reflects the importance of academic, time management, optimism, appreciation of others, and social participation. Research shows that these characteristics can be taught and associated with academic success. It also helps individuals reach their potential, because everyone's potential is unique. There are many similarities between education and positive psychology. The ultimate goal of both is to promote the all-round and healthy development of human beings. The main tasks are embodied in three aspects: first, to correct people's shortcomings, to help those who have problems analyze and eliminate problems; second, to make people more productive and moral, and to complete the self-realization from the biological sense of people to the social people; third, to make talents fully developed on the basis of identifying people.<sup>[5]</sup> Therefore, according to the value orientation suggested by positive psychology, positive education came into being. As an important carrier of higher education, the primary function of universities is talent cultivation. If a university can become a truly positive organization, the people associated with it will become more engaged, use their strengths more, experience more positive emotions, and just as importantly, achieve higher levels of academic achievement.

## **3. PERMA Theory: the elements of a happy life**

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The PERMA Theory is proposed by Martin Seligman in his book, *Flourish*. He pointed out that a person who wants to achieve a vigorous and happy life should have five elements, each of which is a real thing that can be accurately measured and strengthened through learning, which together constitute the ultimate pursuit of the free man.

### **3.1. Positive emotion**

Positive emotions include all the common components of subjective well-being: happiness, ecstasy, comfort, warmth, etc. Positive emotions are not only closely related to the physical health of individuals, but also closely related to their mental health. Positive emotions are an important component of mental health because they can induce a behavioral tendency, thereby building individual resources to counteract negative emotions and thereby promoting individual or organizational performance. More importantly, the accumulation of positive emotions can be achieved through personal efforts.

### **3.2. Engagement**

Engagement refers to being completely immersed in an attractive activity where time seems to stop and self-awareness disappears. It is related to the flow of heart. The life with this goal is called "dedicated life". An engaged person is often able to focus his energy and wisdom on what to do, thereby maximizing initiative, enthusiasm, and creativity. When a person can really engage in the process of work, study and life, he will feel happiness.

### **3.3. Meaning**

Meaning refers to belonging to and working on something that you think transcends yourself. Although it has subjective elements, it is not purely subjective and cannot be equated with positive emotion. From the perspective of history, logic and consistency, calm and objective judgment is likely to be different from subjective one. Lincoln is very melancholy. He may think his life is meaningless when he is in despair, but we think his life is meaningful.

### **3.4. Accomplishment**

A sense of accomplishment is the feeling of being happy or successful when you finish something or do something. The sense of accomplishment usually has nothing to do with one's status, but it can be divided into strong and weak.<sup>[6]</sup> By no means does the inclusion of this element suggest that individuals abandon their pursuit of happiness for the pursuit of achievement, but rather to better describe what humans would choose to pursue in a state of unconstrained freedom.

### **3.5. Relationships**

There is a famous investigation experiment in psychology. Patients who had undergone a cardiac surgery were divided into two groups according to the quality of interpersonal relationships. This kind of surgery is very dangerous, postoperative survival rate of patients is very low. Six months after the surgery, the mortality rate of patients with good interpersonal relationship was only 3%, while that of patients with poor interpersonal relationship was as high as 20%. Loneliness has a great negative effect on life, and the positive effect is rarely seen in loneliness. Others are very important. They are the best antidote to life's downturns, and helping others is the most reliable way to improve happiness.

Having more positive emotions, more engagement, clearer meaning, greater achievement and more relationships leads to stronger sense of happiness. These five elements can be measured, evaluated, and promoted through effective tools.

#### **4. The construction of active higher education**

If a university becomes a truly positive institution, people related to it are likely to become more engaged, to make more use of their strengths, to experience more positive emotions, and equally important, to achieve a higher level of academic achievement.<sup>[7]</sup> Most organizational change will involve some supportive principle modeling, including clear direction and vision, authentic relationship, open communication and a series of other behaviors that can help cultivate a positive atmosphere throughout the University. The happiness model constructed by PERMA theory provides a strong guidance for the positive turn of higher education.

It is based on the PERMA model that this paper puts forward the tentative framework of constructing a positive university, which covers five main aspects of university life: positive learning environment, administrative and teacher environment, social environment, living environment and community environment.

##### **4.1. Positive learning environment**

Extensive research has shown that positive, respectful, and supportive relationships between teachers and students help improve students' performance in all aspects, such as class attendance, participation and resilience. Through positive psychology, educators can encourage students to find new ways to leverage their strengths, help them further develop their strengths, and participate in the learning process. The ultimate goal of positive psychology is to engage in learning, in which "students deal with what they are learning meaningfully, pay attention to what is happening, and actively participate in the learning experience."<sup>[8]</sup> When students have positive learning experiences, they will often share these experiences with others, which will also bring positive word of mouth and higher reputation to the university.

##### **4.2. Administration and teacher environment**

As the reliable consultant for students, the role of teachers and administrators is very important, and they can take advantage of positive psychology practices and create "conditions for improving students' happiness".<sup>[9]</sup> Students' active participation can not only enhance their self-esteem, but also enhance their love for the school. Therefore, universities need to recognize the value of such participation and take measures to encourage the application of positive psychology in educational management and teaching practice.

##### **4.3. Social environment**

In addition to creating a supportive learning environment, positive psychology also contributes to improving the social environment of higher education. Many organizations, such as the Student Affairs and Health Centers, already exist on university campuses, and they naturally conform to the ideas associated with positive psychology. In student organizations, teacher consultants can also strive to apply positive psychology techniques. For example, if a student organization is having difficulty in recruiting members, a teacher consultant can ask the constructive question such as "Which members have we successfully recruited in the past?" to review previous

successes. "Reflecting on past successes" can create positive momentum and encourage members to brainstorm ideas such as how to use social media more effectively and consistently, and then build and implement plans based on these concepts.<sup>[10]</sup>

#### **4.4. Living environment**

In campus life, the living environment is often one of the most difficult links for students to deal with. The practice of positive psychology in the living environment fosters a sense of community based on cooperation and respect. The University of Wollongong, New South Wales, Australia, recently launched the world's first "active living program that relies entirely on the science of positive psychology to enhance students' academic and social experience".<sup>[11]</sup> At William and Mary College, the campus life program aims to promote community participation and healthy relationships among different residents. Finally, a positive living environment can not only meet the needs of current students, but also become a powerful attraction for students to choose a school.

#### **4.5. Community environment**

Higher education institutions play a very important role in their communities. The booming students can have a positive impact on these communities and the whole society, thus promoting industry-university-research collaboration. "For underrepresented students, this sense of community is critical to their personal success and happiness, and is a major predictor of their prosperity, not only in interpersonal relationship, but also in personal academic achievement."<sup>[12]</sup>

#### **5. Conclusion**

The application of positive psychology in higher education will help students develop their potential, understand their individual strengths, integrate into a healthy social and emotional campus culture, and maintain a lasting and benign relationship among administrators, teachers and students. Positive education based on individual strengths promotes students' participation and vigorous development, which is the driving force for universities to maintain innovation and competitiveness.

As researchers gradually understand the relationship between personal happiness and personal achievements in life, positive psychology becomes increasingly important for higher education.<sup>[13]</sup> Therefore, higher education needs to take a positive turn and create transformative experiences for students to prepare for a meaningful future.

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