

"Teaching Well-Being in American Schools and Universities: An Overview"

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Positive psychology is being taught at all levels of education in the United States. The first course in positive psychology was offered in the spring of 1999 to undergraduates at the University of Pennsylvania. Last spring, the largest class at Harvard University (with over 850 students enrolled!) was on positive psychology. According to published reports, there are now some 200 undergraduate courses on positive psychology in the United States.

Shortly after the founding of positive psychology, a Teaching Taskforce was created to foster the teaching of positive psychology in secondary schools. It's hard to know at this point just how many schools are teaching positive psychology in the curriculum or in co-curricular programs. But the U.S. Department of Education has funded a multi-million, multi-year study on the effects of a positive psychology-enhanced 9th grade language arts curriculum, and there is a groundswell of interest among educators at some of the top schools in the country for incorporating a strengths-based approach.

In the fall of 2005, the very first degree program opened its doors to 36 students (including two from the UK). The Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program was started by Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania and offers a full-time, one-year program in positive psychology for professionals and younger students. Offered on the executive education model, it attracts students from across the United States and around the world, with students commuting in each month from as far away as Europe and Asia. They gather to hear leading American researchers and practitioners discuss their latest work, and to learn how they can take positive psychology back to their professional settings. In my role as founding director of the program and one of its principal faculty, I am amazed at the intelligence, enthusiasm, and vision of our students. The ways in which they are already working to transform their careers and their professions is nothing short of inspiring. (More information on MAPP can be found at www.pennpositivepsych.org.) There will soon be a second American university offering degree programs on positive psychology, as Claremont University has plans for Masters and Ph.D. programs in positive developmental and organizational psychology.

One exciting development in the teaching of positive psychology in the United States is the growing collaboration among schools and universities. John Yeager, a MAPP alumnus, is Director of Character Education at Culver Academies in the state of Indiana. He is taking what he learned in the MAPP program and working with his colleagues to infuse positive psychology into the curricular and co-curricular life at Culver. Currently, students in my MAPP 702 class are undertaking service learning projects in which they give positive psychology away. Almost half are working on education projects. A significant number are working on the design of a brand new school in Philadelphia: the Hero Within School. My students are working on curriculum, health and well-being initiatives, and ways to create a positive institution.

I find this synergy delightful and a sign of maturity in the development of positive psychology. I am excited that in the UK, you will very soon have degree programs up and running. I am curious to see how you will continue to establish connections between university education programs and the schools. How you will make in-depth training available for teachers, and how you will build your own bridges between graduate programs and university and school programs. We look forward to continued collaboration with you as we all work to disseminate efficiently and effectively the exciting new knowledge from the science of well-being and positive psychology.