FROM THE EDITORS

Positive psychology has attracted interest from a variety of fields, including business, public health, religion, and education. Given the shared interest between higher education and positive psychology in developing healthy and productive human beings, it is worthwhile to explore how this new subdiscipline of psychology can contribute to the mission of higher education.

This monograph presents a variety of strategies for bolstering student learning and development. The authors also draw from appreciative inquiry, which, like positive psychology, is based on studying strengths, but focuses on organizational rather than individual performance. During a time of daunting challenges, positive psychology and appreciative inquiry can help to leverage higher education’s many assets to optimize the potential of students, faculty, and staff.
Positive Psychology and Appreciative Inquiry in Higher Education

Peter C. Mather
Eileen Hulme
EDITORS

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Peter C. Mather, Eileen Hulme (eds.)
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7. Promoting Social Justice Through Appreciative Community Service

Peter C. Mather, Erin Konkle

Social justice and community service have strong traditions in higher education. In this chapter, the authors describe ways in which positive psychology and appreciative inquiry inform the pursuit of social justice through community service activities.

8. Resources and Readings in Positive Psychology

Peter C. Mather, Eileen Hulme

This chapter presents a variety of resources for higher education professionals interested in applying appreciative education principles to their work.

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Editors’ Notes

Positive psychology has received considerable attention from a variety of professional fields since its inception in the late 1990s. This movement marked a significant shift in the study of psychology from an emphasis on psychological deficits to scientific inquiry focused on aspects of human experiences that make life worth living.

Despite positive psychology’s increasing prominence in areas such as business and public health, its influence on higher education has been modest, and is generally limited to the inclusion of “strengths assessment” in academic advising, first-year experience programming, and leadership education. The purpose of this monograph is to extend student affairs professionals’ understanding of positive psychology’s potential for supporting effective educational practice. The editors and authors of this volume represent practitioners and scholars who have investigated and applied this emerging scholarship to higher education and student affairs.

The connection between higher education and positive psychology is a natural one, as both are concerned with the formation of healthy, productive, and thriving human beings. Student affairs practitioners and scholars have historically sought to cultivate these outcomes through the application of human development theories. While student development theory provides a rich foundation for professional practice, we contend that it is valuable to supplement this theoretical lens with complementary approaches to enrich understanding of educational goals and processes.

Seligman (2002), the founder of the movement, has noted that there are three primary subjects of positive psychology: positive experiences (e.g., emotions), positive traits (e.g., strengths and engagement), and positive institutions. The contributors to this monograph explore all three of these dimensions. In addition, we have included appreciative inquiry (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros, 2003), an organizational development method, as an important facet of positive practice. Although appreciative inquiry was conceived independently of positive psychology, these two areas share the foundational principles of improving practice through focusing on potential and the affirmation of what is working over the condemnation of what is not.

In his recent book, Flourish, Seligman (2011) identified five pillars of positive psychology: positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. These pillars denote “outcomes” associated with positive psychology research. As far back as Aristotle, philosophers and educators have examined and lauded the “good life” as a desirable educational outcome. These outcomes, we believe, are consonant with higher education and student affairs’ rich history as well. On its face, we believe
that many higher education professionals will find resonance with positive psychology–related outcomes such as “optimal functioning” (Ryff and Singer, 2002) and “flourishing” (Keyes and Haidt, 2003; Seligman, 2011).

Positive psychology has been strengthened by its connection to seemingly disparate disciplines. With this in mind, this volume engages theories of leadership and organizational change, evolutionary psychology, and studies of spirituality, among others. We contend that theoretical eclecticism is important to encouraging thriving student affairs practice. Therefore, we are not limiting the monograph to the work of positive psychology or appreciative inquiry, but including other complementary approaches to understanding human and organizational behavior.

Each chapter is designed to introduce central positive psychological constructs, discuss relevant empirical research, and translate key concepts into concrete recommendations for practice. Although the scope of this monograph does not allow for capturing the entire breadth of this evolving discipline, we hope that the following chapters will inspire the reader to explore a new theoretical paradigm that can contribute to flourishing professional practice.

The first chapter of the monograph, authored by Jennifer Bloom, Bryant Hutson, Ye He, and Erin Konkle, presents a framework for organizing positive psychology and appreciative inquiry-inspired educational practice: appreciative education. Bloom and colleagues provide introductory and foundational ideas from positive psychology and appreciative inquiry that are presented with more specific applications in later chapters.

Chapters Two and Three focus on applications of appreciative inquiry (AI) and positive psychology for the development of positive higher education institutions. In Chapter Two, Matthew Fifolt and Lori Lander discuss applications of AI for organizational improvement. They use two case studies to illustrate the antecedents, dynamics, and results of AI interventions. In Chapter Three, Peter Mather and Michael Hess describe a common problem on college campuses, binge drinking, and discuss how positive psychology–inspired leadership practices can result in fresh approaches to dealing with organizational challenges.

Chapters Four and Five delve into recent scholarship on the positive traits of students that result in engaged learning, academic success, and degree completion. In Chapter Four, Laurie Schreiner discusses how to boost the experience of thriving among college students. Curiosity and thriving are two important correlates of student learning, and thus connect positive psychology to this fundamental goal of higher education practice. Chapter Five introduces a nuanced understanding of the character strength of curiosity found in high-achieving college students. Eileen Hulme, Daniel Green, and Kimberly Ladd provide practical suggestions for nurturing this strength for educational success.

Chapters Six and Seven deal with pedagogies growing out of positive psychology and appreciative inquiry scholarship. In Chapter Six, Laura
Harrison and Shah Hasan address the use of appreciative approaches in classroom teaching. In Chapter Seven, Peter Mather and Erin Konkle discuss ways in which appreciative understandings of education and community development can inspire new and effective community service practices.

A wealth of positive psychology literature has been published over the last 15 years. In Chapter Eight, we present a variety of resources that can be useful to educators wanting to explore the discipline beyond the contents of this sourcebook. The chapter includes seminal works from positive psychology, appreciative inquiry, and asset-based community, as well as both philosophical and practical resources to aid educators in their journeys to promote thriving students and enriching learning communities.

We hope that higher education faculty and administrators who read this monograph will find inspiration for new approaches to professional practice. We look forward to hearing your stories about how practicing education from an appreciative approach has worked for you.

Peter C. Mather
Eileen Hulme
Editors

References


Peter C. Mather is an associate professor of Higher Education and Student Affairs and secretary to the board of trustees at Ohio University.

Eileen Hulme is the executive director of the Noel Academy for Strengths-Based Leadership and Education and a professor in the Department of Doctoral Higher Education at Azusa Pacific University.
Appreciative Education

Jennifer L. Bloom, Bryant L. Hutson, Ye He, Erin Konkle

Higher education professionals play a pivotal role in efforts to retain students, but should retention be the primary focus? After all, the definition of the word retain (Dictionary.com, 2012) is: “to keep possession of . . . to continue to hold or have . . . to hold in place or position.” Such deficit-based thinking has led to the massive growth of programming for students that emphasizes topics such as “surviving” college, “recovering” from probation, or academic “remediation.”

Rather than holding students in place, higher education is positioned to help students become their best selves and achieve their dreams, goals, and potentials. This growth requires a culture where employees and institutions are unified in their approach to empowering students. It also requires identifying and capitalizing on the strengths of students and higher education professionals to foster the development of the best qualities of individuals and the organization.

Indeed, education should be a learning experience through which students, faculty, and staff learn together and support and challenge each other. This chapter will highlight appreciative education (AE), an organizational and individual framework for creating a culture with high standards that simultaneously embraces ongoing learning, change, and improvement. The purpose of this chapter is to describe AE, including its theoretical infrastructure, as well as provide strategies for implementing it to guide innovative individual and organizational practices.

What Is Appreciative Education?

Appreciative education is a framework for delivering high-quality education on both an individual and organizational level. It provides an intentional and positive approach to bettering educational enterprises by