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Using *The Happiness Advantage* in a College Honors Program

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In the field of college success and retention, researchers have examined school facilities, grade point averages, SAT scores, high school grades, and student involvement among other variables (Aitken). One of the additional variables that has been examined is how happiness affects college success. According to Shawn Achor's 2010 book, *The Happiness Advantage*, "happiness is the joy we feel in striving for our potential" (17). In the research, happiness has been examined as a trait with which the students may arrive on campus or that they develop while there (Aitken). In either case, the matter of student happiness is of primary importance to teachers and administrators in honors, who work closely with gifted students who may be at high risk for stress and depression.

High school graduation is usually a time of happiness for students, but then moving on and leaving home for college the first time can be stressful. Adapting to the nuances of living with non-family members, adjusting to different schedules, and worrying about personal finances has been linked to depression among college students (Mowbray et al.; Hefner and Eisenberg).

According to Eisenberg et al., depression can affect academic success. Further, depression can lead to other negative health behaviors, including smoking, drinking, and engaging in unsafe sex (Cranford, Eisenberg, & Serras; Weitzman). Suicide becomes a risk for these students as they try to adapt to entering college (Garlow et al.), and honors students might be at a higher risk because of their perfectionism (Rice et al.).

While students are trying to adjust to their new existence, colleges struggle to keep them happy so they will stay there. Researchers have examined GPA, SAT scores, college facilities, roommates, extracurricular involvement, and relationships to determine which factors play the most critical role in retention (Aitken). Workplaces also strive to examine what will keep employees happiest and most loyal (Mitchell, Holton and Lee). Both employees and students who are happy with their environment and their relationships within that environment are often more productive and perform better (Achor). Conversely, sometimes too many social relationships can negatively affect the success of a college student (Aitken). Time management becomes an issue in their satisfaction and success.

Few research studies focus on overall life satisfaction and retention, especially among college students in the United States, but in *The Happiness Advantage* Achor refers to life satisfaction as a critical tool for examining not only happiness but success. He claims that happiness precedes success, not the other way around as many assume, and his book provides a method for becoming happier. College is a part of this bigger picture. Discovering a method to feel more grateful and to think more positively can influence honors and non-honors students. Students can learn these skills both in and outside of class, and Fredrickson showed in 1998 that happier people have been shown to learn better, have more open minds, and be better problem-solvers. Fredrickson also demonstrated later, in 2001, that happier people are more physically fit, have better overall health, and report stronger social relationships because they gravitate toward other positive people.

Other studies have shown how happiness affects the overall success of a college career (Nickerson, Diener, and Schwarz), but little research has focused on promoting and encouraging happiness in the classroom as students progress through college or how to encourage happiness as a lifestyle. Through my preliminary study of how positive psychological principles influenced self-reported life satisfaction among first-year students in an honors seminar, I hope to initiate a broader longitudinal research study that includes more freshmen honors sections. Ideally, I would like to follow the students

through their life after graduation to determine how happiness levels determine future success.

METHODS

Procedures

Each year, new freshmen at Coastal Carolina University (CCU) are required to take a First Year Experience course. In lieu of that requirement, freshmen honors students must take a Freshman Honors Seminar. While the content of the First Year Experience course helps the students to adapt to college life and includes topics such as career exploration, course planning, and library usage, the Honors Seminar focuses more on preparing the students for the rigors of the honors experience at CCU.

The course always has a theme, and this year's theme was "The Good Life." The professors come from varying fields—exercise science, philosophy, and history—and the four assigned books allowed the professors to engage the students within their own specialty areas: Richard Rubenstein's *Aristotle's Children: How Christians, Muslims and Jews rediscovered Ancient Wisdom and Illuminated the Middle Ages*; Michael Sandel's *What Money Can't Buy: The Moral Limits of Markets*; Paul Bloom's *How Pleasure Works: The New Science of Why We Like What We Like*; and Shawn Achor's *The Happiness Advantage*.

Teaching three sections of the Freshman Honors Seminar, with a total of fifty-three students, presented the opportunity to use *The Happiness Advantage* in examining the pressures placed on honors students: the pressures to be perfect and to live up to both the privilege of being in honors and the expectations that they, their parents, and the university had for them.

Participants

Of the 53 students enrolled in three Honors Seminar sections, 3 did not complete both the pre- and post-test so were eliminated from the data. Participants who completed both tests included 20 males and 30 females; the mean age was 18.2; 42 were Caucasian and 2 were African American.

Participants were informed of the risks and benefits of the survey and the data collection, and they received and completed an informed consent, a copy of which was posted on the online learning tool for the course. Students were instructed that they could remove themselves from the study at any time. Anonymity was assured.

The course started with a TED talk Shawn Achor gave from Bloomington, Indiana in 2011 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GXy_kBVq1M> that piqued the students' interest, and I then gave them background information including discussion of Maslow's hierarchy and definition of "identity." The students gave picture presentations, most using PowerPoint, to define themselves to others, highlighting that they had more in common than not. This new knowledge of their classmates and their identities enriched the students' interactions with one another both in and outside the classroom.

Instrument

Before examining the concepts in *The Happiness Advantage*, a Life Satisfaction Survey from the Happiness Center was administered to the students to assess their current life satisfaction; the survey can be found at <<http://www.thehappinesscenter.com/survey/survey.php>>. The Life Satisfaction Survey was administered again after 21 days. Achor posited that, if the Happiness Advantage worked, life satisfaction would improve, and he proffered a 21-day challenge to mark not only quick but long-standing results in life satisfaction; in *The Happiness Advantage*, he claimed that those who completed the 21-day challenge reported higher life satisfaction scores even months later compared to those who did not complete the challenge.

The questions from the Life Satisfaction Survey were as follows:

1. I know what my purpose in life is.
2. I am excited about learning new things and developing my skills and talents.
3. My life is in balance physically.
4. My life is in balance emotionally.
5. My life is in balance spiritually.
6. When life feels "out of control," I choose healthy behaviors to help me re-center and re-new (i.e. I do not use shopping, eating, sleeping, television/internet or other substances to escape and cope).
7. I am aware and enjoy living in the moment (I don't dwell on future or past events).
8. I have fulfilling relationships with family and friends.
9. I have fulfilling intimate relationships in my life.

10. Humor, laughter and playfulness are a big part of my daily life.
11. My partnerships are fairly and equally balanced (work and personal).
12. I find positive ways to deal with stress (i.e. exercise, talking, meditating, etc.).
13. I exercise appropriate control over the things that I can in my life.
14. I live life with an attitude of gratitude.
15. I live my life with passion and joy.
16. I have exciting dreams and aspirations to look forward to.
17. I am an optimistic person.
18. I enjoy hearing other people's insights and points of view, even if they are different than my own.
19. I find it easy to forgive others when I have been hurt.
20. I apologize and make amends quickly when I have hurt someone else.
21. I am good at keeping events in my life in perspective.
22. I live my life with integrity and honesty in all of my dealings.
23. Kindness and compassion are virtues that I practice daily.
24. I perform acts of service daily.
25. I have a strong faith which sustains me throughout my life.

The survey was scored on a five point Likert scale:

0=never, 1=rarely, 2=sometimes, 3=often and 4=always.

In class, the students discussed *The Happiness Advantage* as both a text and a philosophy of life. The principles outlined in the TED talk were presented somewhat differently than they were in the text so I decided to follow the TED talk's suggestions. The five tasks the TED talk suggests include doing the following each day for 21 days:

- write down three new things for which you are grateful,
- write down the one thing that made you happiest in the past 24 hours,
- meditate,

- exercise, and
- perform a random act of kindness.

The students were asked to contribute to an online journal, but students who preferred to document their journal on paper were to check in at each class period with their completed journals. Students were awarded five points for every journal entry, making the overall assignment worth about 100 points. In the journals, the students were only required to document the three things for which they were grateful and the thing that made them happiest in the past 24 hours. Many also documented how they meditated, exercised, and performed the random act of kindness.

Data Analysis

After the completion of the pre and post surveys, the data were entered in an Excel spreadsheet, scoring each component as it was scored on the survey. Data that included gender were also compiled. Pre-assessment and post-assessment were then compared using the t-test function in Excel.

RESULTS

Ninety-four percent (n=50) of the students enrolled in the three sections of the course completed both surveys. Data from those students who did not complete both surveys was eliminated. The assessments were matched for pre- and post-test comparison by student, gender, and/or section number although these data were not part of the research study addressed here. Overall, 18 of the 25 questions on the Life Satisfaction Survey saw a statistically significant improvement over the 21-day assessment. Results can be seen in Table 1.

DISCUSSION

During the 21-day period, the class focused on the content of *The Happiness Advantage*, which covers many of the same topics covered in the Life Satisfaction Survey. For example, Achor's book discusses not worrying (49), living in the present (24), and dealing with stress (51), all of which are addressed in the Life Satisfaction Survey (questions 6, 7, and 12) and saw significant improvements among my Honors Seminar students over the 21 days. Since the assessment took place as the book was discussed, the students

were able to see some dramatic changes in their perceptions of life, the college experience, and ultimate happiness.

Future research needs to include a longitudinal assessment of the students enrolled in these sections. Toward the end of the college experience, these students should again take the Life Satisfaction Survey and compare their results with college seniors who were not enrolled in the course. Additionally, their scores should be compared to their post-assessment scores to

TABLE 1: PRE- AND POST-TEST COMPARISON OF DATA FROM THE LIFE SATISFACTION SURVEY

| Question | Pre-test | Post-test | Difference | p value |
|-----------------------------|----------|-----------|------------|---------|
| Life purpose | 2.36 | 2.96 | 0.60 | 0.000 |
| New things exciting | 3.62 | 3.70 | 0.08 | 0.322 |
| Balanced physically | 2.76 | 2.92 | 0.16 | 0.118 |
| Balanced emotionally | 2.34 | 2.82 | 0.48 | 0.000 |
| Balanced spiritually | 2.50 | 2.74 | 0.24 | 0.116 |
| Healthy coping | 2.08 | 3.20 | 1.12 | 0.011 |
| Life in the moment | 2.58 | 2.98 | 0.40 | 0.004 |
| Family and Friends | 3.36 | 3.66 | 0.30 | 0.002 |
| Intimate relationships | 2.57 | 3.04 | 0.47 | 0.000 |
| Humor, laughter and play | 3.50 | 3.70 | 0.20 | 0.040 |
| Balanced partnerships | 3.00 | 3.14 | 0.14 | 0.227 |
| Deal with stress | 2.50 | 3.10 | 0.60 | 0.000 |
| Control things I can | 2.88 | 3.18 | 0.30 | 0.003 |
| Attitude of gratitude | 2.94 | 3.48 | 0.54 | 0.000 |
| Passion and joy | 3.06 | 3.48 | 0.42 | 0.000 |
| Dreams and aspirations | 3.68 | 3.68 | 0.00 | 1.000 |
| Optimistic | 2.80 | 3.02 | 0.22 | 0.040 |
| Insights and points of view | 2.92 | 3.14 | 0.22 | 0.040 |
| Forgive others | 2.28 | 2.86 | 0.58 | 0.000 |
| Apologize | 3.30 | 3.40 | 0.10 | 0.229 |
| Life in perspective | 2.96 | 3.10 | 0.14 | 0.146 |
| Integrity and honesty | 3.30 | 3.52 | 0.22 | 0.020 |
| Kindness and compassion | 3.36 | 3.44 | 0.08 | 0.376 |
| Acts of service | 2.50 | 2.90 | 0.40 | 0.001 |
| Strong faith | 2.26 | 2.72 | 0.46 | 0.002 |

see if their satisfaction has continued without the immediate influence of the course. Further, retention rates of the students who completed this course should be compared with those not enrolled; more specifically, honors students who took sections of the course other than the three I taught should be compared with those who did. In order to gather the most accurate information, the students in the three Honors Seminar sections surveyed should be tracked throughout their college career, even if they transfer.

A major limitation to the study was the lack of validation of the Life Satisfaction Survey instrument. If this study is repeated, I will use a more widely validated instrument, such as the Satisfaction with Life assessment (Diener, Emmons, Larsen and Griffin), which has been used and validated several times.

The significant improvement in many areas of life satisfaction among the Honors Seminar students suggests that the principles of *The Happiness Advantage*, as well as other positive psychology information, can be useful especially to honors students, who tend to be perfectionists and overachievers who might burn out and possibly have a higher risk of depression. Enrolling in a happiness-oriented honors course during the first semester in college can contribute to a change in attitude that results in a more centered student and can ultimately improve the quality of an honors education.

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