The Science of Happiness Class & THRIVE: a Living-Learning Community

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Today’s Agenda:

Two COBE initiatives:

- **The Science of Happiness** - a 3-credit elective course introducing undergraduate students to interdisciplinary research on ways to cultivate emotional, social, physical and behavioral wellbeing
- **The THRIVE living-learning community and associated research study** (The VCU Lives Study)
First things first.....
Promoting College Student Wellbeing

Mental health is not just the **absence** of mental illness but also the **promotion** of emotional, psychological, and social wellbeing (Keyes, 2002; Keyes, 2007).

To promote flourishing, health and wellness should be at the center of the university experience, and a core component of each student’s experience.
Bringing Theory to Practice

How can universities effectively promote wellbeing among their college students?

1. **Campaign**: Implement a university-wide campaign to promote wellbeing (COBE)
2. **Curriculum**: Create a course focused on the science of wellbeing to integrate into core curriculum of the freshman experience (Science of Happiness)
3. **Housing**: Launch a living-learning experience that focuses on health as the foundation for college student success (THRIVE)
4. **Research**: Examine the effect of these initiatives on college student wellbeing
From Research to Practice and Back Again

COBE's Empirical Research (Teaching Team)

THRIVE LLC

VCU Lives Research Study

Science of Happiness Class
The Science of Happiness: teaching the science of health and wellness
Two Tenets of Positive Psychology

Learning how to live productive and fulfilling lives:
- Flourishing
- Wellbeing
- Eudaimonia
- Hedonia

Learning how to live good lives by:
- Knowing our strengths
- Cultivating our virtues

The Science of Happiness class teaches both
What IS the Science of Happiness?!
Our Version of the Science of Happiness

What we teach:

- Causes of Human Behavior (Genetics and Happiness)
- Depression and Mood States
- Romantic Relationships
- Positive Relationships
- Positive Identity
- Positive Psychology Interventions
- Mindfulness
- Eat, Move, Sleep (Science of Physical Wellbeing)
- Personality Traits and Cognitive Biases (Substance Use Risk)
- Cultivating Strengths and Virtues
- Social Wellbeing (Beyond the Individual)

How we teach it:

- Scientific article (study or review - 1/week)
- Interactive lectures from experts (2/week)
- Facilitated small group discussions (1/week)
- Experiential weekly exercises (1/week)

How we assess it:

- Active participation in class discussions
- Reflective blog posts (public blog)
- Social media posts (weekly)
- End of semester final project (in the community - VCU or RVA)
Wellbeing Theory: Increasing Flourishing Through

A multidimensional theory of wellbeing that includes both eudaimonic and hedonic wellbeing.
Evidence for the 5 factors of PERMA as a single construct (Coffey et al., 2016)
Keyes’ Model of Complete Mental Health

Keyes, 2007
Genetic Influences on Human Behavior

Lyubomirsky, Sheldon & Schkade, 2005
Cultivating our Strengths and Virtues
Identifying Your Strengths and Virtues
Social Wellbeing: The Contagion Effect

Framingham Heart Study: Happiness (Fowler & Christakis, 2009)
From Science of Happiness to THRIVE

● Science of Happiness
  ○ Spring 2016 - pilot (27 students)
  ○ Fall 2016 - required class for new Thrive students (57 students; 20 Thrive participants)
  ○ Spring 2017 - elective open to all students (50 students)
  ○ Fall 2017 - required for all new THRIVE students; optional class for Fit (new themed community)

● Thrive Living-Learning Community
  ○ 2016 - 2017 - first Thrive cohort - full floor in Rhoads Hall
  ○ 2017 - 2018 - second cohort this fall
THRIVE: A living-learning community
THRIVE: A living-learning community

Collaboration between COBE, the Wellness Resource Center, and Residential Life & Housing to create a living-learning experience focused on student health and wellbeing as the foundation for student success.

- Launched Fall 2016 - anticipated 80 students, with 30 ultimately participating
- Students housed in Rhoads Hall
- Priority spot in Science of Happiness class
- Thrive activities: Faculty fireside chats, hiking, trip to Belle Isle, Mindful Moments, Free Ice Water

Free yoga sessions led by Kamini Pahuja every Wednesday from 4-5pm in the Brandt Community Room
VCU Lives: A Study of Residential Life Experiences at VCU

**Overall Goal:** Evaluate the effect of on-campus residential life experiences on college student behavioral and emotional health, and academic success.

**Participants:** Recruited freshman students age 18+ from the following groups...

1. Thrive Residents
2. Student in other living-learning communities (LLC)
3. Random sample of students in non-themed housing
VCU Lives Study Procedures

Fall 2016 (Aug-Nov)
- Send initial email invitation to participate in August 2017
- Emails contain link to an online survey
- Participants receive $10 compensation

Spring 2017 (March-May)
- Invite all previous participants to complete follow-up survey
- Participants receive $20 compensation

Focus Groups & Interviews

Survey Measures
- Alcohol & substance use
- Personality
- Depression & anxiety
- Physical activity
- Eating
- Sleep
- Stressful Life Events
- Flourishing & Mindfulness
- Romantic relationships
- Roommate relationship
- Engagement in Thrive activities
- Enrollment in Science of Happiness
## Study Participation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Invited [n]</th>
<th>Enrolled [n, (%)]</th>
<th>Withdrawals [n]</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thrive</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>30 (49.5%)</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other LLC</td>
<td>260</td>
<td>79 (30.4%)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Housing</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>88 (17.6%)</td>
<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>836</td>
<td>197 (23.6%)</td>
<td>7</td>
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### Sample According to Housing Status

- **THRIVE**: 15.2%
- **GENERAL HOUSING**: 44.7%
- **OTHER LLC**: 40.1%
Planned Analyses & Future Directions

- Examine differences in college student behavioral and emotional health and wellbeing based on housing group
  - Promotion: Flourishing, mindfulness, physical activity, sleep, etc.
  - Problems: Alcohol & substance use, anxiety, depression, peer deviance, antisocial behavior
- Explore the effect of programming (Science of Happiness, Thrive) on changes in mindfulness and flourishing from fall to spring semester
- Study effect of programming and LLCs on first year academic outcomes (GPA)
- Spit for Science - resource for control groups
- Integrate our findings into future programming

Other ideas welcome!
Questions?
Thank you!

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Key Players
Dr. Danielle M. Dick
Dr. Bela Sood
Tom Bannard
Craig Zirpolo
COBE Collaborators
Residential Life & Housing

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