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Promoting Students' Strengths to Cultivate Mental Well-Being: Relationships Between College Students' Character Strengths, Well-Being, and Social Group Participation



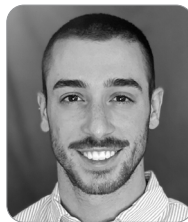
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INCREASED DEMAND FOR MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES ON COLLEGE CAMPUSES has prompted an expansion of what it means to support mental and emotional well-being in the campus community. Although college counseling centers are vitally important, literature suggests that residence life staff already play prominent roles in promoting college students' mental health and responding to their concerns. One way that residential life departments and other student affairs offices can meet students' needs is through promotion of students' strengths. In this study, we explored the relationships between character strengths, subjective well-being, and social group participation in 253 college students. Results show a positive correlation between these variables. We discuss implications of these findings for student affairs professionals and paraprofessionals working with students.

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Over the 30 or more years covered by the National Survey of Counseling Center Directors (NSCCD), directors have reported steady increases in the severity of mental health symptoms reported by college and university students who present for services (Gallagher, 2012b). The most frequent presenting concerns among them are anxiety (50.6% of cases) and depression (41.2% of cases), and these rates continue to increase (Reetz et al., 2015). The increasing rates and awareness of mental health concerns suggest a greater need for services provided by college counseling centers that may not have the capacity or resources to meet these pressing demands. According to the most recent Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors (AUCCCD) annual survey, 35.9% of counseling centers surveyed maintain waiting lists for clients seeking ongoing treatment, and some centers may place an average of 64 students per year on a wait list before a given student is able to receive services (Reetz et al., 2015).

Despite the increased severity of mental health problems (Gallagher, 2012b) and the increased use of counseling center services that often rely on wait lists (Reetz et al., 2015), the majority of college counseling center directors (55.1%) reported that their operating

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budgets did not increase over the previous year (Reetz et al., 2015). Consequently, resources may fall short of demand, and college counseling centers may benefit from maximizing services whenever appropriate and possible (Gallagher, 2012b). Although many college counseling centers may find success in strategies to adapt to increased demands, for many campuses, the prevalence of mental health concerns and the number of students not receiving services might influence students' interactions with other departments. That is, other student affairs professionals in direct contact with students such as resident directors, resident assistants, residential learning community advisors, conduct professionals, and multicultural staff may encounter students' mental health concerns more frequently.

Residence life professionals and paraprofessionals are frequently the first people to notice mental health concerns in students and, similarly, often the first people students inform (Coulter et al., 2003). For example, faced with barriers to psychological services (e.g., stigma, traditional hours of operation), students experiencing depression, anxiety, suicidal ideation, or other manifestations of psychological distress may reach out to familiar resident assistants who already support these students in other ways. The access and trust associated with residence life staff suggest that residence halls are promising points of intervention to promote mental and emotional well-being (Mowbray et al., 2006; Orchowski et al., 2011). Approaches such as counselor-in-residence initiatives (Orchowski et al., 2011) demonstrate innovative, financially conscious, and effective methods to integrate mental health services and residence life. Additionally,

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it may also be beneficial to consider proactive ways in which residence life staff can incorporate strategies that cultivate mental and emotional well-being into their existing roles. More specifically, consideration of proactive mental health components enables more efficient use of resources; these features can be integrated into programming that already occurs in residence halls without requiring extensive training or overburdening staff with additional responsibilities.

RESEARCH FRAMEWORK: POSITIVE PSYCHOLOGY

One framework we may use to address the issues related to mental well-being faced by college students is offered by positive psychology, which is defined as "the study of positive emotion, positive character, and positive institutions" (Seligman et al., 2005, p. 410). Three constructs investigated by positive psychologists that may yield benefits for work with college students are character strengths, well-being or life satisfaction, and social group participation. These seem particularly relevant to college students, as the field of positive psychology places importance on social

involvement by identifying relationships and engagement as two of the five goals of well-being theory (Seligman, 2011). These constructs are often emphasized by programs and learning outcomes that support student adjustment and success, particularly those of residential life departments, living-learning communities, diversity offices, and others (Ardaiolo et al., 2011; Herdlein & Zurner, 2015; Reynolds & Chris, 2008).

Character Strengths

Seligman and colleagues (2005) offer six overarching virtues that are cross-culturally endorsed: wisdom, courage, humanity, justice, temperance, and transcendence. Organized under these broad virtues are 24 character strengths (Karris & Craighead, 2012). In general, the relationship between character strengths and well-being has been heavily researched in the positive psychology field (Peterson, 2006). Some of these strengths include love (giving and receiving love and care), hope (optimism), curiosity (seeking new experiences), and zest (vitality and enthusiasm; Karris & Craighead, 2012; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Researchers have found that these four

positive character strengths correlate the most highly with general measures of well-being (Park et al., 2004).

According to the small amount of scholarship related to character strengths in college students, those students who made more use of their self-identified strengths reported higher levels of subjective and psychological well-being, confidence, self-esteem, and psychological vitality (Govindji & Linley, 2007). Additional studies indicate that a particular array of character traits can predict college satisfaction and even academic performance (Lounsbury et al., 2009; Park & Peterson, 2009). Seligman and colleagues (2006) found that psychotherapy utilizing this framework was effective in reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety in both children and adults. Others have found that the increased presence of some character strengths such as hope, spirituality, zest, leadership, and gratitude correlate with lower levels of depression and/or anxiety (Park & Peterson, 2008). Because developing and changing understandings of self can be an integral part of college students' experiences, further exploration of links between their character strengths and well-being may yield important insights and provide tools for individuals who work with this population.

Subjective Well-Being

Another area of study that shows promise for use with college students is subjective well-being, understood as "a person's cognitive and affective evaluations of his or her life" (Diener et al., 2002, p. 63). The general concept of well-being refers to optimal psychological functioning and may include both cognitive and affective components (Diener, 2009). Well-being theory was constructed from five measur-

Individuals who endorsed love (giving and receiving love and care), hope (optimism), curiosity (seeking new experiences), and zest (vitality and enthusiasm) also tended to subjectively indicate higher levels of well-being and satisfaction with life.

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able elements: positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning and purpose, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). These five elements and their subjective nature offer a more holistic perspective of an individual's well-being. For example, poor mental health has been correlated with poor academic performance (Eisenberg et al., 2009), and students might be more likely to notice changes in their academic performance than they are to recognize symptoms of psychological distress for what they are. In this way, subjective well-being may include a more well-rounded understanding of individual functioning. Research exploring the relationship between character strengths and subjective well-being suggests correlations between greater subjective well-being and the character strengths of love, hope, zest, and curiosity (Park et al., 2004; Rashid et al., 2013).

Social Group Participation

Student involvement has been significantly correlated with positive psychological well-being and health-related behaviors (Bowman, 2010; Kilgo et al., 2016). Although participating in social activities requires an investment of time and energy (Braxton et al., 2004), research (e.g., Bowman, 2010) indicates that social integration facilitates psychological well-being in addition to having positive effects on common university metrics such as retention (Astin, 1993, 2016). Students seem aware of these benefits and appear to consider social group participation as a defining feature of the campus community; in one study, 70 percent of college students reported that participating in social activities in college is more important than academics (Grigsby, 2009). Colleges and universities provide students with many different organizations, clubs, and social gatherings

to fit different aspects of their identities (e.g., major-based residential communities, racial/ethnic cultural groups, LGBTQ-related organizations, religious/faith-based organizations, athletic clubs). Additionally, this construct may be of interest to professionals and student leaders in residence life promoting cocurricular activities or offering residential programming to meet students' needs.

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RATIONALE

In this study, we sought to explore possible relationships between the four key character strengths—love, hope, zest, and curiosity—and subjective well-being and social group participation in order to potentially improve the ways in which residence life departments and staff approach efforts to support students' mental and emotional well-being. In earlier studies, the character strengths of love, hope, zest, and curiosity were the most highly correlated with subjective well-being (Park et al.,

2004; Rashid et al., 2013). However, previous studies did not examine these relationships in a college student sample or include the additional variable of social group participation. Such a sample of college students and the consideration of social group participation would enable this literature to more effectively inform the efforts of student affairs personnel and, specifically, of residence life staff. Thus, in an effort to replicate previous research findings and include the additional considerations, we asked the following research question: Does a relationship exist between character strengths (love, hope, zest, and curiosity), subjective well-being, and social group participation?

METHOD

Participants

Participants were recruited using the SONA System at a large Midwestern public university, by snowball sampling, and through contacts via email and Facebook. All students, ages 18-24, enrolled in college were eligible to participate. No other eligibility requirements were set. Data were collected from 254 students, ranging from 18 to 24 years of age ($M = 20.6$). One outlier was removed from the data, ending with 253 total participants. Please see Table 1 for more information. This sample represents the population that had access to this study (i.e., students enrolled in courses that offer credit through this SONA) relatively well.

Procedure

Participants were provided informed consent information and then directed to an online survey. Participation was voluntary, and students had the right to opt out by exiting the survey at any time; completion of the survey reflected their agreement to participate. All

Proactive prevention efforts and holistic student development are the cornerstones of student affairs and residence life. Encouraging students to utilize their strengths to their fullest can lower distress, improve well-being, and cultivate community.

participants completed three questionnaires in addition to a brief demographic form: an 8-item social group participation measure developed for the purpose of this study, the VIA Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), and the Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985).

Instruments

Demographic form. Participants responded to a standard demographic questionnaire that asked about age, gender, race, and student status.

VIA Inventory of Strengths. The VIA Inventory of Strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) is a 240-item self-report questionnaire that measures the degree to which participants possess 24 character strengths. The items are scored on a 5-point Likert-style scale. Higher numbers on a scale reflect more character strength in that area, whereas lower scores reflect less character strength. Participant character strengths are recorded in rank order, starting with the top five scales known as signature

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Table 1				
Participants' Age, Gender, Race/Ethnicity, and Student Status (N = 253)				
Characteristics	<i>n</i>	%	Mean	Total <i>N</i>
Age			20.6	253
18	9	3.6		
19	65	25.7		
20	62	24.5		
21	48	19.0		
22	34	13.4		
23	22	8.7		
24	13	5.1		
Gender			-	253
Male	84	33.2		
Female	169	66.8		
Other	0	0		
Race/Ethnicity			-	251
European/White	190	75.1		
Black	14	5.5		
Hispanic	9	3.6		
Asian	4	1.6		
Biracial/multiracial	14	5.5		
Other	20	7.9		
Unknown	2	0.8		
Student Status			-	251
First-year	24	9.5		
Sophomore	72	28.5		
Junior	73	28.9		
Senior	56	22.1		
Graduate studies	26	10.3		
Unknown	2	0.8		

strengths. All scales show internal consistency with Cronbach's alphas greater than .70, and test-retest correlations for all scales are greater than .70 (LaFollette, 2010). The authors of the measure have also made a conscious

effort to make the instrument cross culturally valid by evaluating the VIA-IS in 54 different nations, finding that character strengths are rank-ordered in a similar fashion around the world (LaFollette, 2010). The VIA-IS was also

normed on a sample of 759 undergraduate college students (Karris & Craighead, 2012).

Satisfaction with Life Scale. The Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener et al., 1985) is a 5-item scale designed to measure the global cognitive judgments of one's subjective well-being. Participants indicate their responses for each of the five items on a 7-point Likert-type scale (Diener et al., 1985). Overall scores on this scale range from 5 to 35, with higher scores indicating higher levels of subjective well-being. This measure has been shown to be both valid and reliable around the world with a wide variety of age groups and applications; the scale shows internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha of .87 and test-retest correlation of .82 (Pavot et al., 1991).

Social group participation. The researchers created a social group participation item based on a review of literature regarding college student social group activity and participation. A group of counseling experts reviewed and revised the item response options. The researchers reviewed a list of student clubs and organizations available at the university at which the study was conducted and organized these social associations into thematic groups that included the following: university clubs, societies, leadership, engagement, fraternity/sorority affiliation, NCAA Division I athletics, intramural activities, student government, religious and spiritual organizations, community organizations, and other participation. Participants were prompted, "Please check the social groups you are currently involved with" and provided a list of seven thematic groups and an "Other" option. Responses were summed to yield an index of overall social group participation.

Data Analysis

We used SPSS software 22.0 version to conduct data analyses. This included descriptive statistics, frequency statistics, and Pearson product-moment correlations. Descriptive and frequency statistics were used to describe demographic characteristics as well as participants' involvement in social groups. The Pearson product-moment correlations were used to assess the strength of a linear association between variables. All assumptions underlying these statistical techniques were met. Only one significant outlier was identified, and it was removed from the data.

We computed a Pearson product-moment correlation to assess the relationship between the character strengths of love, hope, zest, and curiosity and subjective well-being; between social group participation and subjective well-being; and between the four character strengths and social group participation.

Character strengths and subjective well-being. Preliminary analysis showed the relationship to be linear with both variables normally distributed, as assessed by the Shapiro-Wilk test ($p > .05$). As shown in Table 2, results revealed a moderate positive correlation between subjective well-being and love, $r(250) = .467$, $p < .01$, with love explaining 22% of the variation in well-being; a moderate positive correlation between subjective well-being and hope, $r(250) = .357$, $p < .01$, with hope explaining 13% of the variation in well-being; a moderate positive correlation between subjective well-being and curiosity, $r(250) = .387$, $p < .01$, with curiosity explaining 15% of the variation in well-being; and a moderate positive correlation between subjective well-being and zest, $r(250) = .429$, $p < .01$, with zest explain-

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Table 2		Correlation Between Character Strengths and Subjective Well-Being (SWB)				
		Love	Curiosity	Hope	Zest	SWB
Love	Pearson correlation	1	.650**	.766**	.671**	.467**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	252	252	252	252	252
Curiosity	Pearson correlation	.650**	1	.730**	.785**	.387**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	252	252	252	252	252
Hope	Pearson correlation	.766**	.730**	1	.808**	.357**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	252	252	252	252	252
Zest	Pearson correlation	.671**	.785**	.808**	1	.429**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000
	N	252	252	252	252	252
SWB	Pearson correlation	.467**	.387**	.357**	.429**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	
	N	252	252	252	252	252

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

ing 18% of the variation in well-being. Table 2 reflects these results.

Social group participation and subjective well-being. Preliminary analysis showed this relationship to be linear with both variables normally distributed, as assessed by the Shapiro-Wilk test ($p > .05$). A positive significant relationship between social group participation and well-being was found, $r(250) = .197$, $p < .01$. Table 3 illustrates this finding.

Table 3			Correlation Between Social Group Participation (SG) and Subjective Well-Being (SWB) for all Participants	
		SWB		
SG	Pearson correlation	.197**		
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.002		
	N	252		

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Social group participation and character strengths. A positive significant relationship was found between social group participation and love, $r(250) = .127, p < .05$; curiosity, $r(250) = .159, p < .05$; and zest, $r(250) = .184, p < .05$. No significant relationship was found for hope. Table 4 illustrates these findings.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study was to advance an understanding of how the following variables relate with one another: character strengths

(love, hope, zest, and curiosity), subjective well-being, and social group participation. In light of the fact that previous studies have proposed a relationship between well-being and love, hope, zest, and curiosity (Park et al., 2004; Rashid et al., 2013), we sought to reproduce these findings and explore their potential relationships with social group participation in a college student sample.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations are present in the current study. Broadly, they include self-report bias, lack

Table 4

Correlation Between Social Group Participation (SG) and Character Strengths

		Love	Curiosity	Hope	Zest	SG
Love	Pearson correlation	1	.650**	.766**	.671**	.127*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.044
	<i>N</i>	252	252	252	252	252
Curiosity	Pearson correlation	.650**	1	.730**	.785**	.159*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.011
	<i>N</i>	252	252	252	252	252
Hope	Pearson correlation	.766**	.730**	1	.808**	.112
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.076
	<i>N</i>	252	252	252	252	252
Zest	Pearson correlation	.671**	.785**	.808**	1	.184**
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.003
	<i>N</i>	252	252	252	252	252
SG	Pearson correlation	.127**	.159*	.112	.184*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.044	.011	.076	.003	
	<i>N</i>	252	252	252	252	252

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

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The correlation between psychological well-being and character strengths suggests that the bolstering and development of existing strengths might benefit treatment if and when students receive counseling services.

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of experimental control, and generalizability. The first of these is inherent in the study, as all included measures are self-report questionnaires. Therefore, conclusions are drawn based solely on the viewpoints of the participants. Many of the questions included in this study could be considered sensitive, and therefore it is plausible that participants could choose to respond in socially desirable ways. Many questions also related to a person's level of social activity, and participants could have responded in ways to make them appear popular or involved. Because this study did not use an experimental design (i.e., no variables were manipulated), findings indicate correlation rather than causation. Therefore, this study is unable to demonstrate a causal relationship between character strengths, social group participation, and subjective well-being. For example, although it may appear that social group participation facilitates increased well-being, the inverse (i.e., subjective well-being leads to more social group participation) may be more accurate. Additionally, convenience sampling via the university's human subjects research system was used instead of random sampling methods (e.g., emails sent

to addresses randomly selected from the entire student population) to recruit participants. Moreover, the majority of the participants in this study attend the same university in a small rural community. Therefore, it may be difficult to generalize to other populations in other schools, communities, and age groups or from other ethnic and racial backgrounds. A majority of the participants also identified as White, limiting the generalizability to other racial groups.

Given the positive, correlational relationship between social group participation and subjective well-being, expanding the definition of social activity to include other aspects of connectedness and social engagement could provide more robust results. Broadening the concepts related to positive subjective interpersonal experiences to include participation in social groups, one-to-one interactions with peers, levels of engagement, and levels of fulfilled connectivity could provide deeper

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Given the link between character strengths, college satisfaction, and academic achievement, the benefits of targeting character strengths through activities and intentional programming are remarkable. For example, hopeful journaling and zest-motivated sleep hygiene have the potential to increase well-being and improve collegiate productivity.

insights into which types of social activity improve life satisfaction. Incorporating a more diverse sample, particularly relating to race and ethnicity, would improve generalizability to a larger scope of college-age students and allow the researcher to investigate whether group differences exist. Finally, research that is able to establish causal relationships, rather than the correlational ones in this study, between character strengths, social group participation, and subjective well-being would provide useful insight into how residence hall programming can be deployed to maximize benefits.

RESULTS

Character Strengths and Well-Being

Previous researchers have identified a relationship between subjective well-being and the character strengths of love, hope, zest, and curiosity (Park et al., 2004; Rashid et al., 2013). These correlations were confirmed in our study. Individuals who endorsed love (giving and receiving love and care), hope (optimism), curiosity (seeking new experiences), and zest (vitality and enthusiasm; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) also tended to subjectively indicate higher levels of well-being and satisfaction with life. While this may make intuitive sense, these relationships had yet to be confirmed in a study using a college student sample that also included a measure of social group participation. The significant positive relationship we found between character strengths (love, hope, zest, curiosity) and subjective well-being reinforces the results of previous research on adult populations and highlights multiple points at which college counseling centers may more effectively intervene with college students. The

number of students seeking university counseling services continues to rise (Gallagher, 2012a), and, given the surplus of students and the limited availability of resources, many students may turn to trusted peer leaders such as resident assistants for support and information. Students facing increased psychological distress could continue to benefit from the formal interventions that counseling centers offer. Additionally, they may find that the less formal programming and social interactions typical in a residence hall capitalize on their individual signature strengths. The correlation between psychological well-being and character strengths suggests that the bolstering and development of existing strengths might benefit treatment if and when students receive counseling services.

Many interventions that are appropriate for use in higher education and mental health contexts have already been found to increase well-being. Activities such as journaling or making art that emphasize an individual's awareness of and appreciation for their character strengths can provide a means to reflect upon and bolster these strengths (Darewych & Riedel Bowers, 2018); expressive writing and reflective journaling, for example, have been found to promote hope (Connolly Baker & Mazza, 2004; Pennebaker, 1990; Seligman et al., 2005). Improvements in sleep hygiene and energy have been associated with increases in the character strength of zest (Niemiec et al., 2012), and cultivating relationships may increase love (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Given the link between character strengths, college satisfaction, and academic achievement, the benefits of targeting character strengths through activities and intentional

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programming are remarkable (Loundsbury et al., 2009; Park & Peterson, 2009). For example, hopeful journaling and zest-motivated sleep hygiene have the potential to increase well-being and improve collegiate productivity. A residence hall program that involves students writing about their hopes for final exams may bolster the character strength of hope and subsequently reduce anxiety and promote self-efficacy. Similarly, resident assistants in housing communities that include first-year students may consider incorporating the students' strong sense of curiosity into activities, given that feelings of homesickness and inadequacy can be common in this demographic. In light of these promising possibilities, further research is needed to better understand how professional staff and student leaders might develop and access specific interventions to increase well-being. Proactive prevention efforts and holistic student development are the cornerstones of student affairs and residence life. Encouraging students to utilize their strengths to their fullest can lower distress, improve well-being, and cultivate community.

Social Group Participation and Well-Being

In addition to character strengths, we hypothesized that social group participation may relate to well-being. We found this link significant.

Our measure of social group participation created a sum measure of social groups that the participant was actively involved with at the time of the study. These groups included social clubs or organizations, athletic teams (both NCAA and intramurals), community organizations, student government, and spiritual or religious organizations. Being part of a group requires a commitment for long-term social engagement that may allow an individual to feel more connected to others and may cultivate identity development through connection to a theme-based community (Carpenter-Song et al., 2012). Therefore, it is not surprising that social group participation was related to higher levels of subjective well-being.

Many professionals and paraprofessionals encourage students, particularly those new to the university, to get involved in activities on the basis that this promotes retention (e.g., Astin, 1993). The current study indicates that initiatives to involve students in groups throughout their tenure in college may be associated with benefits well beyond traditional metrics of retention, completion, and post-graduation marketability. If this is true, student-facing staff on campus may benefit from supporting the efforts of residence life staff and taking a more active, integrated role in promoting social involvement among students. For example, residence hall programming might include participation and representation from college counseling centers, diversity offices, and other engagement-oriented departments. Such collaborations may lead to more effective referrals to on-campus groups and increased familiarity with mental health and student support services. Similarly, professionals supervising student leaders such as hall directors might

encourage and support efforts to collaborate with student organizations for programming in residence halls.

Social Group Participation and Character Strengths

Many of the interventions created to cultivate the use of character strengths (particularly relating to love, hope, zest, and curiosity) involve aspects of social connectedness. Some examples include writing letters of gratitude to others, engaging in athletic teams, or reaching out to old friends. The field of positive psychology identifies relationships and engagement as important components of well-being (Seligman, 2011). It comes as no surprise, then, that love, zest, and curiosity all related to social group participation. Our findings support the assertions of character strength theory about social connections (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Surprisingly, hope was not significantly correlated with social group participation. One explanation for this result may be offered in the quality of life literature. Veenhoven (1999) suggests that Western societies place larger value on individualism: becoming aware of one's own preferences and working to fulfill those preferences individually. Therefore, a person's desire to achieve the best out of life by attending college (i.e., one possible manifestation of the character strength hope) may be more independently driven toward factors such as career and financial stability and less geared toward building community and lasting relationships.

IMPLICATIONS

The use of character strengths—specifically the four key strengths of love, hope, zest, and

curiosity—has been found to be correlated to increased well-being. These findings imply exciting possibilities for residence life professionals interested in supporting students' mental and emotional well-being. Rather than offering one type of intervention that may be accessed to improve outcomes among college students, we have offered three inter-related options. While professional staff and student leaders may wish to focus on character strengths, cultivation of group participation, or well-being in general, there may be added benefit to designing programs that prioritize all three. College and university campuses and particularly residence halls may provide ideal environments to cultivate health through comprehensive attention to students' ability to participate and engage in social groups, cultivate character strengths, and manage well-being. For example, residential life staff and student leaders might wish to invite the collaboration of various departments and student organizations when developing programming that aims to cultivate character strengths. Also, departments and organizations may broaden their reach and effectiveness by establishing an integrated presence at these events (e.g., counseling center staff engaging in outreach during first-year student move-in day).

We found that higher levels of subjective well-being are correlated with higher levels of social group participation. This finding reveals the importance of connecting with others and is particularly salient for college students whose self-concept and identity are in the key stages of development formation (Blimling, 2013). Based on these findings, establishing stronger connections between student affairs professionals and paraprofessionals may allow

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for the possibility of networking and connecting students to services that fit their needs. For those working in residential settings, building relationships with campus organizations, athletics, and various departments and being more knowledgeable about resources available on campuses can help bridge these gaps between the traditional services offered to students and the connectedness to groups that can increase satisfaction with life. It can also add a new dimension to the focus of existing services (e.g., counseling) that students may already be utilizing. The present research provides a better understanding of the importance of social group participation, particularly for students who feel isolated and alone and desire that level of connection with others.

CONCLUSION

This study found significant, positive relationships between the four key character strengths of love, hope, zest, and curiosity; subjective well-being; and social group participation in a sample of college students. It is our hope that understanding these relationships better will allow college student personnel to improve the quality of services for and interactions among college students.

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Discussion Questions

1. How might the de-stigmatization of college students' mental health concerns contribute to the demand for campus counseling and related services?
2. When would it be more appropriate to emphasize social group participation and character strengths-based programs to avoid overuse of or delays in mental health resources?
3. How might we tackle the relationship between the increased expectations of residence life staff to provide mental health support and their experiences of burnout and secondary trauma?
4. With the elevated demand for college student mental health services, we have seen an increased number of free online platforms (apps such as Youper, online therapy options, hotlines, etc.). In what ways could partnerships with such platforms enhance services available to students?
5. What are some specific initiatives that may be implemented by residence life departments based on character strengths, subjective well-being, and social group participation, as suggested by the authors? How can residence life departments collaborate with other functional areas on effective programming?
6. In what ways can positive psychology and a focus on strengths-based character development be integrated into the residential curriculum of various residence life departments?

Discussion questions developed by Hannah Hench, Mount Aloysius College, and Denise L. Davidson, Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania.