

A Longitudinal Study on the Psychological Well-Being of College Students

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Abstract

An inventory on the psychological well-being of college students was developed then given to a cohort of students in their freshman, sophomore and senior years. Overall, the well-being of students steadily improved. The largest improvements were in the social relations with staff and faculty, and with personal competencies such as self-discipline and academic skills. However, declines were also observed in health habits and spiritual practices. These results have implications for colleges interested in strengthening the well-being of their students.

Poster presented at the 117th convention of the American Psychological Association, 2009. The author can be contacted at the Department of Psychology, St. Bonaventure University, St. Bonaventure, NY, 14778. More information on the Inventory of Learning Climate and Student Well-Being is available at wellbeingincollege.org

A Longitudinal Study on the Psychological Well-Being of College Students

In accord with theories of psychological well-being (Ryff, 1995; Keyes, 2007) an inventory on student well-being was created and refined, then used to monitor the mental health of a class of students over four years at a major regional university. The inventory included dimensions on goals, autonomy, environmental mastery, spirituality, healthiness, and social relationships as well as perceptions of curricular and extracurricular learning environments. The inventory used 6-point self-identity scales (1 = definitely does not apply to me; 6 = definitely applies to me) with each of its 48 items. Early research on this inventory established alpha values of at least .59 for separate dimensions and alphas on the overall scale that ranged between .89 to .93. These results were replicated by a second independent researcher at a large mid-west university (Cole, 2008).

Method

Assessment samples were taken at the end of the freshman, sophomore and senior years at a comprehensive, private university of about 2,200 full time students. The inventory was delivered by instructors in core required courses. Doing this yielded a highly representative quota sample of gender, age, and academic major. Respondent identification questions included gender, hometown, major, campus residence, smoking habits, drinking habits, study and work hours and a global assessment of their happiness as students. Although participants completed the inventory anonymously, they were tracked by

matching variables on gender, hometown, and major. Of the 180 students who started the study, 140 were followed through to their senior year. About 54% of the participants were women. The students ranged in age from 18 to 26 years.

Results & Discussion

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) revealed that the overall psychological well-being scores of students increased from their freshman to senior year ($\Lambda(32, 772) = 7.45, p < .001$, particularly on dimensions concerning academic skills, $F(2, 401) = 12.80, p < .001$; social skills, $F(2, 401) = 10.07, p < .001$, and relations with faculty $F(2, 401) = 13.64, p < .001$. However, their scores on healthiness $F(2, 401) = 6.76, p < .001$ and spirituality $F(2, 401) = 18.29, p < .001$ declined (please see Figures 1, 2, & 3). ANOVAs and Scheffe tests revealed that education majors had higher well-being scores than journalism majors, $p < .059$ but were statistically equal to all other majors. This effect may have been confounded by gender. A high percentage of women were education majors and women had higher well-being scores overall than men, $p < .01$. Students who drank frequently but at moderate levels had higher well-being scores than those who drank less frequently but at high levels, $p < .001$. Drinking appeared to be a risk to mental health when it was an uncontrolled distraction, not a deliberate diversion. Interestingly, well-being scores varied with type of residence. Students who lived most their time at college in townhouses had higher well-being scores than those in upgraded suite-style dormitories, $p < .001$.

While the results of this study suggest that college experiences build and strengthen human well-being, they also suggest that this favorable outcome is at the expense of poorer health habits and weakened spirituality. The results of the

present study are similar to those found in past research (Ambler, 2007; Cole, 2008; Walker, 2006) and compel discussions on the quality of the learning experiences of students in light of what we now know or theorize about psychological well-being. However, before major policy decisions are made, there is certainly a need for more research at other types of colleges and more studies involving matched control groups of non-students. The national samples investigated by Keyes (2007) also suggest that education is associated with stronger mental health, nonetheless, this effect has to be demonstrated under more control conditions.

References

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Figure 1

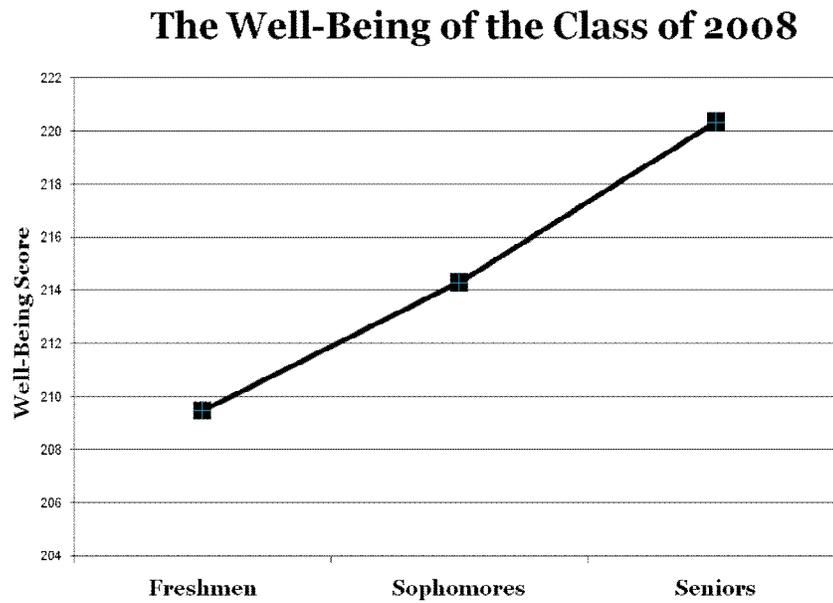


Figure 2

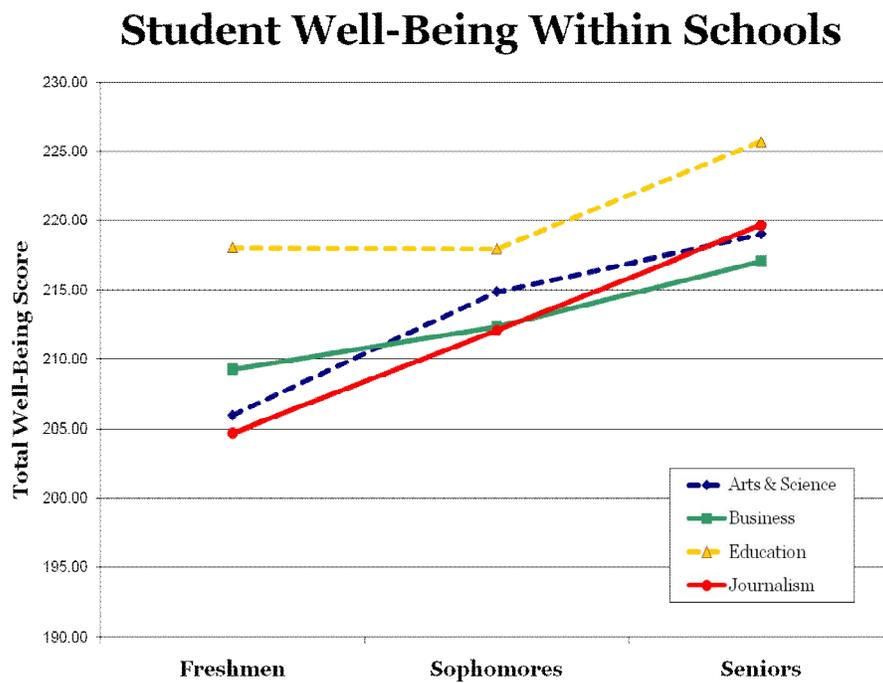
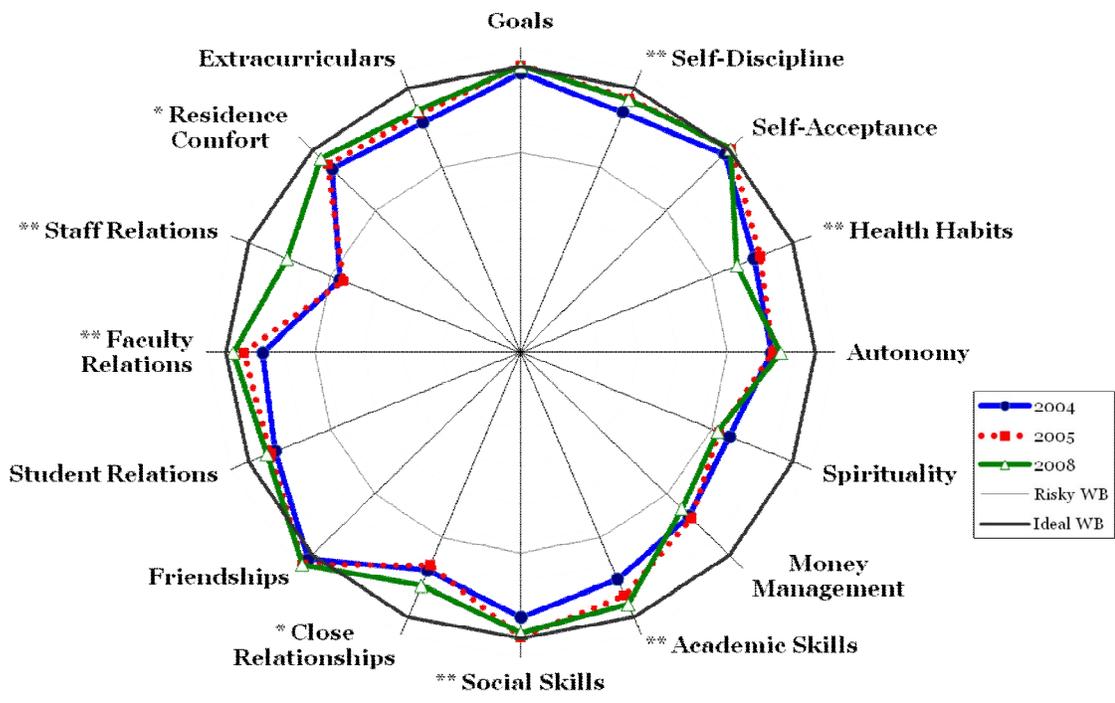


Figure 3

Specific Changes in Well-Being in the Class of 2008



* p < .05
** p < .01