

Secular Ethics and the Happy LIFE Project: Future Steps to Integrate Flourishing Practices Into the LIFE Community

The introduction of practices that promote happiness and flourishing on an institutional level at LIFE University through the Happy LIFE project represents a bold move. This memo suggests future directions that can expand on the successes of the Happy LIFE project and make LIFE University a thought-leader in the promotion of happiness and flourishing in higher education, attracting greater attention and funding for the university's efforts, by connecting the Happy LIFE project with trends in positive psychology, secular ethics, and contemplative pedagogy.

Thus far, no higher education institution has sought to introduce a comprehensive array of evidence-based practices for flourishing and engage in research on its effects on students, faculty, and staff. There is already strong trend in this direction, however. The John Templeton Foundation, a major funding body, has reached out to institutions to engage in scientific research on how a university education might build character and integrity. Moreover, movement in this direction has been coupled with interest in bringing contemplative practices into higher education, since such practices are central to the promotion of the healthy habits of mind that result in greater flourishing. The Mind and Life Institute, founded by H.H. the Dalai Lama, is developing a "secular ethics initiative" that will seek to develop curricula for schools and universities grounded in the cultivation of basic human values that promote flourishing. The University of Virginia established a new Contemplative Science center that integrates research on health, meditation, psychology and neuroscience. The Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, an organization dedicated specifically to promoting flourishing practices in higher education, has been growing steadily in size and recently announced the first journal solely for the study of contemplative practices that promote flourishing, *Contemplative Inquiry*. As research in positive psychology grows, showing that flourishing and genuine happiness are protective for a number of health and life problems, including suicide, mental illness, and a host of other issues, universities are increasingly developing "Happiness" and "Contemplative Practices" courses, and some are considering the creation of undergraduate majors or minors in these areas, or the integration of such courses into their core curriculum for all students.

LIFE is already well poised to become a thought-leader in this area, and a model for other institutions to follow. The Wellness Portfolio, Eight Core Life Proficiencies, Lasting Purpose, and Life's vitalistic philosophy are all naturally aligned with the cause of secular ethics. Furthermore, LIFE enjoys a common ethos among faculty, staff and students in terms of a commitment to holistic well-being. In order to achieve this, however, it would be beneficial to consider the following questions:

1. How can flourishing practices be fully integrated into the university's curricular and extra-curricular offerings so that every student and staff member who enters LIFE becomes transformed through the process of their time here?
2. How can research on the benefits of these practices be coordinated and facilitated, so that programs are evaluated and refined in an on-going manner?
3. How can such programs be made sustainable and marketed, such that they contribute to the growth of the university, its visibility, the size of its student

body, and its financial stability?

If we are able to address these three questions, we are well on the way to developing an evidence-based university experience for students that promotes flourishing and well-being, providing students with not only “head knowledge” but also “heart knowledge” and life skills that are based on the latest scientific research and best practices. Market research suggests that prospective students are looking for a distinctive educational experience that combines these exact elements. Moreover, such a system will be self-improving, since it will be aligned with research, and it will be a model for other universities to follow. It will serve as a strong basis for fundraising, attracting grants, and attracting students, which can further improve LIFE’s academic and institutional resources.

Existing Resources:

1. Master’s Program in Positive Psychology
2. Student Success Center
3. The Happy LIFE project
4. Student Ambassadors
5. Wellness Portfolio
6. Eight Core Proficiencies
7. Service Activities

Proposed Steps:

1. Create an **undergraduate major** in “Secular Ethics, Wellness and Peace Studies” that would embody the promotion of emotional, physical and social well-being through holistic, interdisciplinary education. This interdisciplinary major could result in the establishment of a **Department of Contemplative Studies**, an interdisciplinary department that would attract faculty and students in this fast-growing field.
2. Establish a **Center for Compassion, Secular Ethics and Peace**. This Center for transformational change would promote scholarly inquiry, research, social outreach and institutional development. It would hold regular events and conferences, attract funding, and bring in post-doctoral and graduate student scholars as well as visiting fellows to serve as a think-tank around the research and implementation of secular ethics. The Center could serve as the location for a **meditation room** as well as a **compassion lab**, which would house research on secular ethics and contemplative practices.
3. Create programs at the **Student Success Center** that promote positive mental health, such as meditation, and teach students practices for flourishing.
4. The integration of flourishing practices into **orientation** and **faculty and staff development** activities.

Steps already taken in 2013:

1. Planning of the Octagon conferences on the theme of “Integrity and

Citizenship” which will explore secular ethics and its implementation in institutional settings. The Dalai Lama has been invited to attend one of these conferences and has verbally accepted this invitation.

2. A committee has been established to explore how to integrate and promote secular ethics at Life, and to examine the goals of promoting flourishing at all levels of the university.
3. A speaker series has been created by the Psychology Department to invite prominent speakers on campus to give talks on positive psychology and secular ethics. Three such talks have already taken place in 2013 and more are planned for 2014.
4. Internal funding has been acquired for research on secular ethics at Life University, specifically a grant to examine the impact of training elementary school teachers in compassion meditation on teacher and student behaviors. This study will run in early 2014.