**Positive Psychology Teaching Task Force Meeting Summary**

April 13-15, 2000

Philadelphia, PA

**Chair**:

Randy Ernst, Psychology and English Teacher, Lincoln High School, Nebraska

**Participants:**

Karen Anderson, PhD, American Psychological Association

Charlie Blair-Broeker, Psychology Teacher, Cedar Falls High School, Iowa

Charles Brewer, PhD, Professor, Department of Psychology, Furman University

Katherine Dahlsgaard, Graduate Student, Department of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania

Carrissa Griffing, Coordinator, Positive Psychology Network

Amy Fineburg, Psychology and English Teacher, Homewood High School, Alabama

Wade Pickerin, Historian, American Psycological Association (partial attendance)

Alexandra Rutherford, Graduate Student, Department of Psychology, York University (partial attendance)

Martin Seligman, PhD, Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Pennsylvainia

C.R. (Rick) Snyder, PhD, Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Kansas

Shannon Wiltsey Stirman, Graduate Student, Department of Psychology, University of Pennsylvania

**Task force members not in attendance:**

###### Laura King, PhD, Southern Methodist University

David Myers, PhD, Hope College

## Summary

The purpose of the Positive Psychology Teaching Task Force Meeting was to plan strategies of disseminating Positive Psychology through teaching. The meeting began with remarks by Dr. Seligman and Dr. Snyder about the history of Positive Psychology and the need for awareness of this movement among high school and college-level psychology teachers and students. The remainder of the weekend was spent discussing methods of dissemination and planning their implementation. A central theme throughout the discussion of these goals was to keep the science of Positive Psychology at the center of the field. The task force developed and planned methods of dissemination in the following areas: Unit plans for teaching Positive Psychology in high school, Positive Psychology courses and texts for high school and college, teaching Positive Psychology at a graduate level, Introducing Positive Psychology into existing curricula and training teachers, a Positive Psychology Listmaster, and dissemination of information about Positive Psychology.

Opening Remarks

### Dr. Seligman’s address

Dr. Seligman began with a summary of where the Positive Psychology movement is now. He told the task force there were no preconceived notions or hidden agendas for the weekend, and asserted that the ideas that the task force had could shape the future of Positive Psychology. There is funding available for textbooks and good ideas. Teaching at all levels (high school, college, and graduate training) should be in mind throughout the weekend.

There are five pillars upon which the Positive Psychology network has focused:

1. Past, Present, and Future in Positive Psychology

Positive Psychology-Past:

Contentment and Life Satisfaction

Positive Psychology-Present:

#### Flow, Positive affect

Positive Psychology-Future:

Hope, optimism, faith

1. Positive Human Strengths:

What are they? There is not a taxonomy yet, but people are studying ways to foster strengths.

Dr. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is leading workshops on alternatives to materialism.

1. Positive Institutions:

Sociology and political science have studied disabling institutions such as racism. Dr. Kathleen Hall Jamison is studying civic engagement in young people as a way to understand what positive institutions currently exist, and are possible in the future.

1. Taxonomy:

Dr. George Vaillant is leading the effort to create an opposite of the DSM. Hopefully, within a month or two, there will be funding for this endeavor.

1. Teaching:

This weekend’s focus

**Other happenings in Positive Psychology** include:

The Templeton foundation’s award for the best research in Positive Psychology from a researcher under the age of 40

Positive Psychology Summit 2000, in Washington DC, at the Gallup headquarters.

Positive Psychology Summer Institute 2001 for graduate students, post-docs, and junior faculty to be held in California.

Akumal III, for mid-career investigators to discuss advances in Positive Psychology

People in the arts, law, and history have expressed an interest in shifting the focus of their fields to the study of human strengths. People in these and other fields plan to come together to discuss what their fields have in common, and whether they can participate in a general effort to increase awareness of positive strengths.

In light of these developments, Dr. Seligman pointed out that some of the defining moments in human history have occurred during times when nations were prosperous and at peace. People have turned to science to ask, “What are the best things in life?” Psychology has traditionally focused on how to get people out of their worst moments, instead of developing strengths. It is time for the focus to shift.

Dr. Seligman concluded his remarks by saying that we are at the beginning of a movement that has the potential for far-reaching impact. The task of this group is to educate youth to carry on the tradition that Positive Psychology is beginning: to focus on human strengths and look beyond the “safety net.”

**Dr. Snyder’s address**:

Dr. Snyder highlighted the sense that it’s time for this Positive Psychology, and cited his intellectual influences; Hans Strupp, Karl Menninger, and Fritz Heider, who all saw the need for this movement, but before people were ready to embrace it. He noted that Dr. Menninger gave an APA presidential address in 1965, in which he said that psychology needed to focus on strengths. Dr. Snyder expressed his appreciation to Dr. Seligman for bringing the movement to fruition when the timing was right. Additionally, Dr. Snyder mentioned that there are many who are ready to see Positive Psychology develop. The University of Kansas has had a positive clinical program and a health psychology program for decades, and this generation of psychologists is ready to see Positive Psychology develop, and contribute.

Dr. Snyder pointed out that the original goal of psychology was to help people, but the field lost its vision. Positive Psychology, as a science, can study the basis of human strengths. There is a need for both “top-down” and “bottom-up” participants in the field. Teaching is an ideal arena to disseminate the science to the next generation, and there are many possibilities to make Positive Psychology a central agenda of our youth. Dr. Snyder asked the task force not to underestimate these possibilities. Positive Psychology still carries a pejorative tone for some, and therefore we can educate people about the science of strengths.

##### Discussion

Teaching students to focus on strengths and positive traits will be central to the teaching of Positive Psychology. Dr. Seligman commented that asking students to focus on things that they are proud of, and teaching them how bring out each other’s pride can be a valuable teaching exercise.

Because altruism is another area in which valuable teaching experience can occur, it was discussed as a part of curriculum. Although some school districts do not require service, there are benefits to altruism. Students who engage in altruistic acts report that their day goes better afterwards, and that it leaves them more satisfied. In fact, moral elevation is recognized as a physiological response to altruism—an example of how Positive Psychology can inform us about optimizing our abilities and strengths. However, assigning altruism might not be as beneficial as assigning students to notice when they are philanthropic, and where they can help. Dr. Anderson pointed out that the requirement to actually perform an altruistic act might take away the intrinsic motivation, although Dr. Seligman has found that that hasn’t been the case with his students.

Goals of the Task Force and Plans for Implementation

The remainder of the meeting was spent “Building the Fifth Pillar of Positive Psychology”: listing the possibilities and starting to develop projects that would facilitate the teaching and dissemination of Positive Psychology.

The task force outlined the following short- and long-term goals:

# Positive Psychology Unit Plans

The task force focused on two ways to approach teaching Positive Psychology: unit plans for the high school level curriculum, and the infusion of Positive Psychology throughout various areas of psychology. Unit plans will form a power base and prevent ambiguity. They will also prevent Positive Psychology from getting pushed aside by teachers who may otherwise be reluctant to revamp their curriculum, because unit plans will distinguish Positive Psychology as a distinct field within psychology. The possibility that the TOPSS board could disseminate the unit plans was discussed, and the task force agreed that the involvement of TOPSS board members in this endeavor will be important for its success.

Two unit plans will be developed:

A five-day plan will cover positive subjective experience. Myers’ Pursuit of Happiness and Diener’s 1999 Psychological Bulletin papers are possible guidelines for a unit in positive subjective experience.

A five-day unit will cover positive traits, such as those outlined in the Wellsprings.

A goal of publishing the unit plans by the October Positive Psychology Summit was set. Dr. Seligman suggested asking Dr. Diener to invite ten top high school teachers to the summit for the unveiling of the unit plan. Additionally, Ms. Fineburg will write an article for the TOPSS newsletter and for the ASCD newsletter introducing Positive Psychology and the unit plans.

Positive Psychology Courses and Texts

A second area discussed was the development of courses and texts designed specifically to teach Positive Psychology as a course. Both seminar courses and 12\*2 lecture courses were discussed. The development of a textbook is central to the development of a lecture course. Dr. Snyder and Dr. Shane Lopez are developing a textbook that will be geared towards upper-level high school and introductory college level courses. Dr. Snyder suggested a high school teacher become a co-author of the Positive Psychology textbook.

The January, 2000 American Psychologist may also serve to increase awareness of Positive Psychology to the extent that textbook authors may include Positive Psychology in future editions. Dr. Seligman mentioned the potential application of teaching other disciplines, such as history, with a positive slant.

For teachers who are interested in teaching positive psychology, Dr. Seligman’s Positive Psychology syllabus, is available through the Positive Psychology website, and other syllabi will be added.

The task force also discussed graduate-level teaching extensively. Several related issues were discussed: How can a positive practice become an option for those with few economic resources, rather than just being for those who can afford it? Public endeavors such as researching and validating strengths that the positive youth development organizations are interested in developing are a way to broaden positive practice. The task force discussed many ways for positive practice and graduate training in Positive Psychology, to gain credibility, such as setting high standards for training, accreditation through an independent body, and the backing of positive youth development organizations. Given the complexities and numerous decisions involved in developing a Positive Psychology program at a graduate level, the task force decided that a separate committee is necessary. Dr. Snyder volunteered to serve on the second committee, and will serve as a liaison between groups.

Infusion of Positive Psychology into Existing Curricula & Training Teachers

The infusion of Positive Psychology into existing curricula will serve to highlight the Positive Psychology perspective in the central areas of psychology, including learning, developmental psychology, and abnormal psychology, and will increase awareness of the relevance of Positive Psychology in diverse areas of the field as a whole.

Introducing Positive Psychology into the national standards was also discussed as a method of infusion. The national standards for teaching psychology were designed as a living document, and are up for revision annually. Positive Psychology can therefore be included on the agenda relatively soon. Finding places in the standards that could reflect Positive Psychology has the potential for a large impact on the teaching of Positive Psychology.

Increasing awareness and interest in members of the National Association of Secondary School Principals is another way to get more support for the teaching of Positive Psychology. The task force made plans to increase awareness of Positive Psychology among this group.

A plan for Positive Psychology awareness week in schools will also be developed by task force members. Geography’s strategy for raising awareness, which brought the field back to life, is an excellent paradigm for Positive Psychology to follow. Finding funding once the science is developed for a national campaign is many years away, but the task force viewed an awareness campaign as a central goal.

Workshops and conferences will be important for teacher training. There seem to be two approaches: nationally, which will have faster, exponential, ripple effects, and regionally, with TOPSS members attending workshops that would train them to hold local workshops. Dr. Snyder and Mr. Blair-Broker emphasized the importance of face-to-face contact to increase interest. Dr. Snyder pointed out that enlisting researchers’ involvment in these workshops could be beneficial in raising awareness in high schools. The task force explored the idea of asking Positive Psychology researchers to mentor teachers and students. Either e-mail mentoring or matching mentors and teachers by geographical region might be a practical way to promote relationships between high-school teachers and university professors. The Positive Psychology research directory will be representative of researchers in all regions in the U.S.; and will serve as a valuable resource.

A National Science Foundation (NSF) Workshop proposal is potential way to make conferences possible. However, the task force noted that NSF tends to resist viewing psychology as a science, as do many school systems. The task force made plans to begin writing an NSF grant to fund workshops.

The task force also planned to develop incentive programs for teaching Positive Psychology. Contests would raise awareness and inspire teachers and students. Dr. Snyder suggested soliciting papers from high school students and teachers, and publishing them in psychology journals. Special sections or issues of student psychology journals as well as academic journals could be devoted to student papers in Positive Psychology.

However, while targeting the exceptional teachers and students is important, the task force agreed it is equally important to reach students and teachers who would not necessarily enter national competitions. Distributing recognition might be a better strategy than rewarding only a few students, because it will prevent self-selection. It is also possible that teachers could make entry into the Positive Psychology competition an assignment. One award that might be an incentive is a visit from noted psychologists.

The task force discussed the possibility of working with the Psychology Partnerships Project (P3) to form partnership and mentoring programs.

# Dissemination of Information

# The task force discussed the need to delegate the dissemination of information about the field of Positive Psychology. A network of Positive Psychologists will share the responsibility of dissemination through appropriate media channels. The directory of Positive Psychology will distribute the responsibility and dissemination of the science through media channels.

A second aspect of dissemination is the Positive Psychology primer, a “thin book” presenting a brief but comprehensive overview of Positive Psychology to teachers and psychologists. The purpose of the primer will be to stimulate the interest of busy professionals, inspiring them to learn more about the field. The task force acknowledged that the primer should begin with a statement about what Positive Psychology is and is not, in order to emphasize that positive psychology is not a “quick-fix” or value-driven movement. The primer and other awareness-raising publications will emphasize Positive Psychology’s goal of providing descriptive information about positive human traits, rather than endorsing particular prescriptives for action.

Listmaster for Teaching Positive Psychology

Closely related to above goals is a Positive Psychology teaching website. The website will serve as a resource for people seeking unit or course plans, provide advice on highlighting the Positive Psychology perspective in areas of psychology that they are teaching, and keep teachers up to date on developments in Positive Psychology. This website will also have a directory of approximately 200 researchers in Positive Psychology, who could serve as contacts and mentors to high school teachers, and might be available to attend and support regional Positive Psychology workshops for high school teachers.

Long-Term Goals

Longer-term goals included raising awareness by establishing a Positive Psychology awareness week; competitions; workshops and conferences; applying for a National Science Foundation grant for workshops; and forming alliances with other organizations.

Several issues need further development. They center around raising awareness of Positive Psychology in schools, and inspiring teachers to develop creative and challenging Positive Psychology curriculum. An important challenge facing Positive Psychology is finding ways to inspire teachers, and to increase training in psychology among high school teachers.

### Closing remarks

Mr Ernst’s remarks:

Mr. Ernst thanked the task force for their efforts, and acknowledged Dr. Seligman and Ms. Griffing’s efforts in organizing the weekend. He told the group that now that the goals have been established, the real work can begin. Mr. Ernst concluded by commenting on the exciting possibilities that arose out of the weekend’s work.

Dr. Seligman’s remarks:

Dr. Seligman thanked the group for their enthusiasm and willingness to do the work that lies ahead. He said that this is the right time for Positive Psychology, and that the task force is off to a promising start.