

THE WELL-BEING OF WILLIAM & MARY STUDENTS

March 2013

Report by the Student Affairs Assessment Committee

In the fall of 2012, the Division of Student Affairs administered a survey to William & Mary undergraduate and graduate students to assess their levels of well-being. The survey was an initial effort to gather baseline data to support and inform the division's vision: *to create an engaging learning environment in which community is strengthened and individuals flourish.*

According to the theory of well-being developed by Martin Seligman at the University of Pennsylvania, well-being is comprised of five independent elements¹:

P ositive Emotion:	Happiness, satisfaction, feelings of living the "pleasant life"
E ngagement:	Being one with an activity ("flow"), loss of self-consciousness
R elationships:	Positive relationships with others
M eaning:	Sense of belonging to and serving something you believe is bigger than yourself
A ccomplishment:	Includes success, achievement, winning, and mastery <i>for their own sakes</i>

Researchers at the University of Pennsylvania have been developing a survey to measure well-being according to this framework. Those researchers kindly shared their work-in-progress with the College for the purposes of this investigation.

The survey consisted of 20 questions exploring various aspects of well-being, such as:

- In general, to what extent do you feel positive?
- How much of the time do you lose track of time while doing something you enjoy?
- How satisfied are you with your personal relationships?
- In general, to what extent do you feel what you do in your life is valuable and worthwhile?
- How much of the time do you feel you are making progress towards accomplishing your goals?

Four of the 20 questions focused on negative aspects of mental health, such as feelings of anxiety and loneliness, and one question served as an overall measure of respondents' happiness. Each item was answered in the form of a rating scale with options ranging from 0 to 10.

Three demographic variables (gender, racial/ethnic group, and W&M social class) were obtained through Banner and used for the purpose of conducting comparative analyses. Responses to the

¹ Seligman, M. E. P. (2011). *Flourish*. New York: Free Press.

survey were analyzed in the aggregate only, and no effort was made to connect individual students to their responses.

RESPONDENT CHARACTERISTICS

The survey was sent to 1700 randomly-selected, full-time students (graduate and undergraduate) who were at least 18 years old. Approximately 45% responded and completed the survey. The respondents mirrored the demographic characteristics of the general student population fairly accurately. The distribution of social classes was almost exactly the same as in the general student population; White students and women were slightly overrepresented.

RESULTS

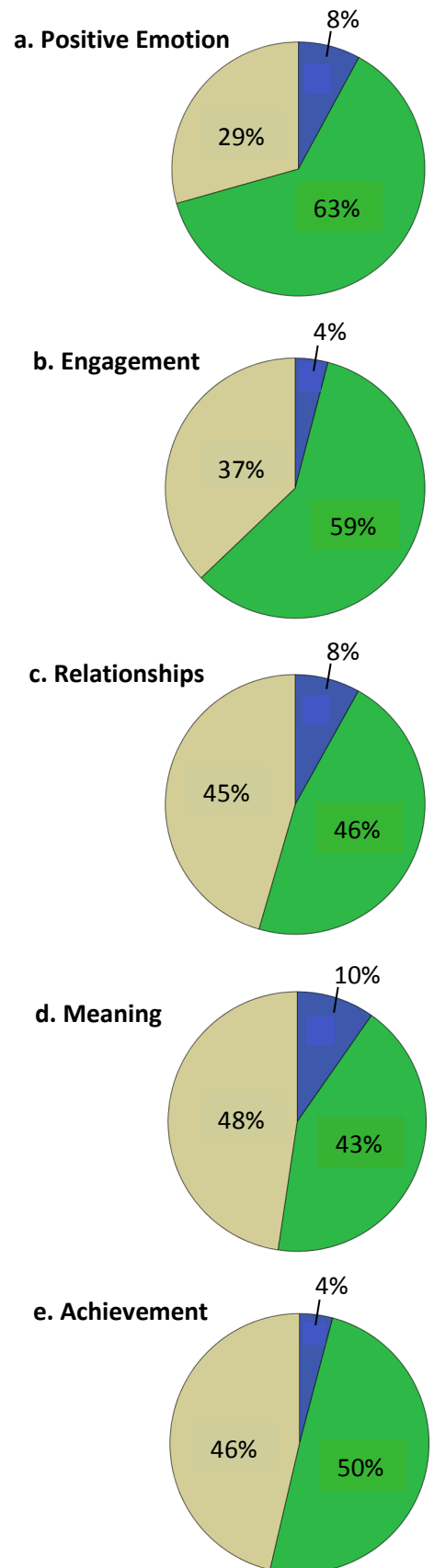
The survey items were grouped into six scales: one for each of the PERMA elements and one that combined the negative items. The scales were divided into low, middle, and high ranges in order to help us identify any patterns of flourishing and languishing among the respondents.

Flourishing and *languishing* describe people who exhibit very high and very low levels of well-being, respectively. As yet, there are no specific definitions of flourishing and languishing in the framework of the PERMA theory of well-being. The students who fell into the low range on all five PERMA elements (less than 1% of respondents) would almost certainly be considered languishing, and those in the high range on all five elements (just under 10%) would almost certainly be considered flourishing. Most respondents fell somewhere in between, either scoring in the middle range on all five dimensions or having scores in different ranges on different elements. Taking all of the respondents together, the average score for each element fell in the middle range.

The pie charts in Figure 1 illustrate the percentage of respondents who scored in the low, middle, and high ranges on each of the PERMA elements. Knowing that William & Mary students are highly talented in a variety of ways, it is not surprising that we would see 96% of students in the middle and high ranges on the Achievement scale. An equally impressive percentage fell in the middle and high ranges (combined) on the Engagement scale, although the percentage of students in the high range alone was smaller

Figure 1.

Blue = lowest range
Green = middle range
Tan = highest range



for Engagement than it was for Achievement. (Remember that “engagement,” according to this theory, refers to the experience of being fully absorbed in one’s activities, not simply being involved.)

The results on the Meaning dimension are perhaps the most interesting. More students fell in the low range on Meaning than on any other scale, but Meaning is also where we saw the largest percentage of students in the high range. This may be explained—at least in part—by the group differences described below.

GROUP DIFFERENCES

W&M SOCIAL CLASS

Given that college is a time of tremendous growth and development, it would be reasonable to expect a gradual increase on at least some of the PERMA scales from freshman to senior year. This was clearly not the case. Overall, the pattern of responses was fairly similar across classes, with a few notable exceptions.

Among undergraduates, the average scores for sophomores and seniors across the five dimensions were generally higher than the averages for freshmen and juniors, although the

The sophomores stood out for their homogeneity compared with other classes, particularly on the dimensions of Positive Emotion, Engagement, and Meaning.

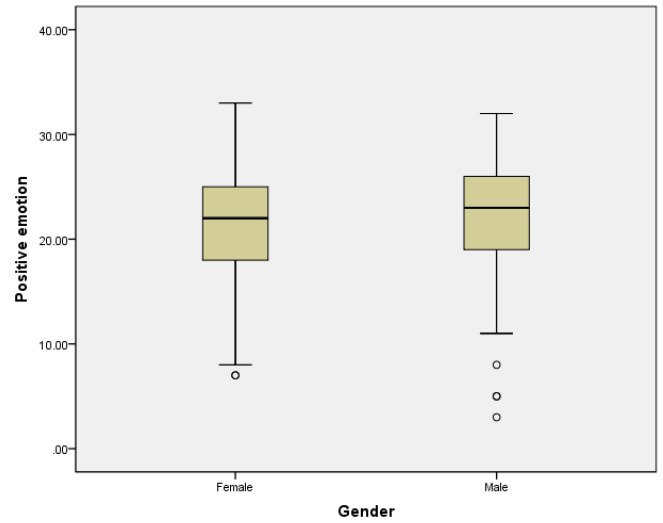
differences among these class averages were small. The sophomores stood out for their homogeneity compared with other classes (including graduate students), particularly on the dimensions of Positive Emotion, Engagement, and Meaning. The range of scores among the sophomores was narrower and the scores were clustered more tightly around the mean. Juniors showed the greatest variability among the groups on the dimension of Meaning, and graduate students were the most varied on the Engagement scale.

Some differences were more apparent when we compared the scores of graduate students with those of all undergraduates combined. Again, graduate students showed greater variability on Engagement, but remarkably less variability on Meaning. 56% of graduate students were in the high range of the Meaning scale, compared to only 45% of undergraduates. This is understandable, considering that students in graduate programs have made a commitment to a particular field of study, whereas many undergraduates are still in a time of exploration. Graduate students were also stronger on the Achievement dimension, with 55% falling in the high range, compared to 43% of undergraduates.

GENDER

There were only a few noteworthy differences between men and women on any of the dimensions of well-being. On average, men fared slightly better than women on questions related to the negative aspects of mental health (i.e., men reported lower levels of anxiety, loneliness, etc). This is consistent with the fact that a greater percentage of men fell into the high range on the Positive Emotion scale (31% of men vs. 28% of women); however, a greater percentage of men also fell into the *low* range on Positive Emotion (9% as opposed to 7% of women). Figure 2 shows that overall, the Positive Emotion scores of the men were less spread out than the women’s scores, and a few outliers at the low end of the scale probably account for the higher percentage of men in the low range.

Figure 2.



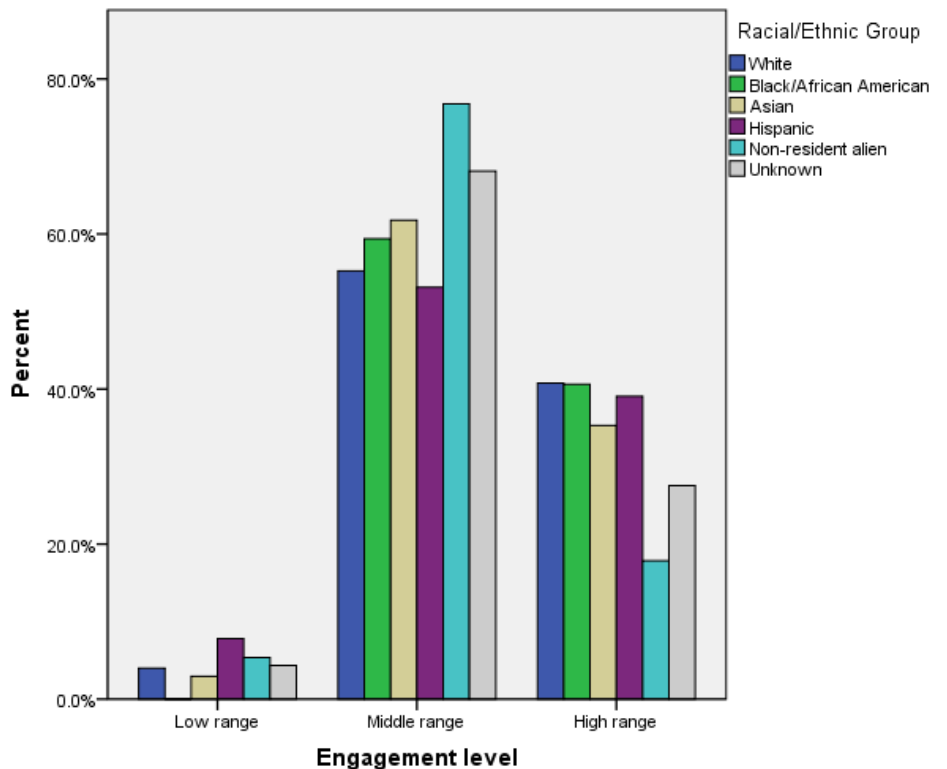
The tan boxes represent the middle 50% of scores. The horizontal line within each box represents the mean. The “whiskers” indicate the 5th and 95th percentiles. The circles represent outliers.

RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUP

Note: For these comparisons, we excluded students classified as “Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander” and “Multi-race” because there were fewer than 30 respondents in each of those groups.

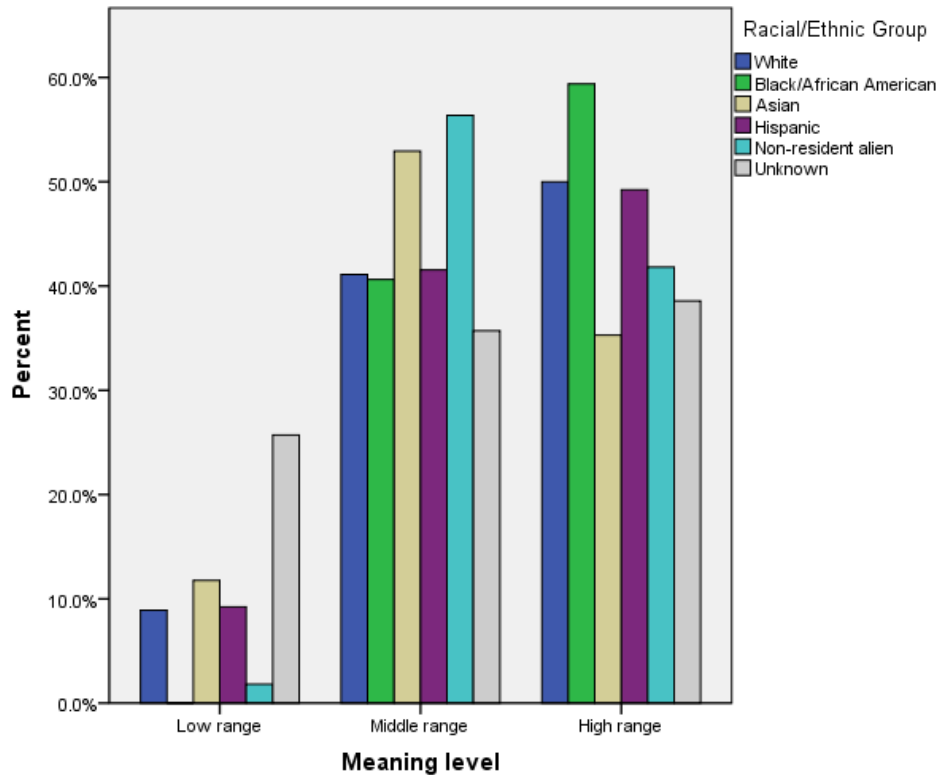
Like the other comparative analyses, there were relatively few significant differences among respondents based on racial/ethnic group. The most striking findings were seen in the Engagement and Meaning dimensions, shown in Figures 3a and 3b. As we saw in Figure 1b, only a very small percentage of students from any racial/ethnic group fell in the lowest range on the

Figure 3a. Engagement



Engagement scale. The percentage of Hispanic students in this range may appear high compared to other groups, but the actual number of students is very small. Not a single Black/African American student fell in the low range on either Engagement or Meaning, and Black students had the highest percentage of all racial/ethnic groups in the uppermost range of Meaning (59%).

Figure 3b. Meaning



There is a particularly high percentage of students in the low range of Meaning whose racial/ethnic group is “Unknown.” These are students who, for whatever reason, did not identify a racial/ethnic group when they entered the College. Because there are a number of reasons why a student might not have provided this information, the finding may or may not indicate an area of concern. We will need to compare this year’s findings with results from future surveys to see if a consistent pattern emerges.

CONCLUSION

What do these findings really tell us about the well-being of William & Mary students, and how will the results help the College to more effectively address students’ needs? These are important questions, but also difficult to answer at this point. This survey was conducted primarily to establish a baseline for comparison with future data. Subsequent administrations of the survey will help us to determine, for example, whether the differences noted among social classes reflect something unique about this year’s classes or a larger predictable pattern. As the University of Pennsylvania researchers continue their work on the survey, we may eventually be able to determine how William & Mary students compare to students at other institutions on the various dimensions of well-being. For now, however, the findings presented here will be shared with key members of the faculty, staff, and administration, and will contribute to ongoing discussions about well-being and what it means to flourish at the College.