

Integrating Positive Psychology into College Mental Health Education: Significance and Implementation Strategies

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Abstract: College students increasingly face mental health challenges. Traditional education emphasizes treatment over prevention, revealing significant limitations. This paper examines how positive psychology can enhance college mental health education in China. We analyze its theoretical foundations, practical significance, and implementation strategies. Results show that positive psychology aligns with national policies, addresses traditional education gaps, and meets student needs. We propose four implementation strategies: curriculum integration, experiential learning, faculty development, and institutional support. This framework provides practical guidance for optimizing college mental health education systems.

1. Introduction

College students face unprecedented mental health challenges in the 21st century. Recent surveys indicate that approximately 30% of Chinese college students experience psychological distress, with depression and anxiety being the most prevalent issues [13, 33]. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated these challenges, with reported rates of anxiety and depression increasing by 15-20% [2].

Traditional mental health education in Chinese colleges follows a problem-oriented approach, focusing primarily on psychological counseling and crisis intervention [8]. This model has proven insufficient for three reasons. First, it reaches only 5-8% of students with diagnosed disorders, leaving the majority without support. Second, it emphasizes treatment over prevention, addressing problems only after they emerge. Third, it fails to promote positive development and optimal functioning among all students.

Positive psychology, pioneered by Seligman [28], offers an alternative approach. Rather than focusing solely on pathology, it emphasizes human strengths, positive emotions, and optimal functioning [27]. This paradigm shift has significant implications for college mental health education. Research shows that positive psychology interventions can reduce depression by 25-30% and increase life satisfaction by 20-25% [31].

Despite growing interest in positive psychology, its integration into Chinese college mental health education remains limited. Most colleges lack systematic frameworks for implementation [7]. This gap creates an urgent need for practical guidance.

This paper addresses this need by examining how positive psychology can enhance college mental health education in China. We pursue three objectives: analyze positive psychology's theoretical foundations and development in China, examine its significance for college mental health education, and propose a comprehensive implementation framework.

Our approach integrates theoretical analysis with practical application. We synthesize international research with Chinese cultural contexts, ensuring recommendations are both evidence-based and culturally appropriate. The framework we propose has been informed by successful pilot programs at several Chinese universities, demonstrating feasibility and effectiveness in real-world settings.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section 2 reviews positive psychology's core concepts and development in China. Section 3 analyzes its significance for college mental health education. Section 4 presents an implementation framework. Section 5 concludes with implications and future directions.

2. Positive Psychology: Core Concepts and Development

2.1. Theoretical Foundations

Positive psychology emerged as a response to traditional psychology's focus on pathology and dysfunction [28]. Its core premise is that happiness can prevent mental illness, not merely result from its absence [5]. This represents a fundamental paradigm shift from deficit-based to strength-based approaches.

The field rests on three pillars [27]. First, positive emotions including joy, gratitude, and hope broaden cognitive processes and build psychological resources [5]. Research shows that positive emotions enhance creativity, problem-solving, and resilience [14]. Second, positive traits such as character strengths and virtues form the foundation of optimal functioning [23]. The VIA Classification identifies 24 character strengths organized under six virtues. Third, positive institutions create environments that foster individual flourishing [27].

These pillars are interconnected. Positive traits can enhance positive emotional experiences and protect against mental illness. Positive institutions provide conditions for developing individual strengths. Together, they promote comprehensive mental health improvement.

The PERMA model [27] provides a practical framework for understanding well-being through five elements: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. Each element contributes independently to flourishing and can be cultivated through specific interventions. This model has been particularly influential in educational settings, offering clear targets for intervention design.

Empirical research supports positive psychology's effectiveness. Meta-analyses show that positive psychology interventions significantly increase well-being ($d=0.34$) and reduce depressive symptoms ($d = 0.23$) [31]. Effects persist for 3-6 months post-intervention. Interventions targeting multiple pillars show stronger effects than single-component approaches [29]. Notably, positive psychology interventions demonstrate effectiveness across diverse populations, including college students, working adults, and clinical populations.

2.2. Development in China

Positive psychology entered China in the early 2000s. Professor Peng Kaiping of Tsinghua University pioneered its introduction and localization [19]. Recognizing cultural differences between Western and Chinese contexts, Peng adapted positive psychology theory to Chinese cultural values and social realities.

Key localization efforts include three areas. First, theoretical adaptation: Peng proposed "flow" as a culturally relevant concept, emphasizing harmony between individual and environment [22]. He

identified Chinese dimensions of positive personality, including filial piety, modesty, and perseverance. Second, empirical research: Chinese scholars have examined positive psychology's effectiveness in Chinese contexts. Studies show that gratitude interventions increase life satisfaction by 18-22% among Chinese college students [10]. Character strengths predict academic achievement and psychological adjustment [3]. Third, practical application: Peng established the Positive Psychology Research Center at Tsinghua University in 2008. The center conducts research, offers training, and promotes positive psychology in education and organizations.

Publications have popularized positive psychology in China. Peng's books including "The Healing Power of Flow" [20] and "The Character of Children" [21] combine theory with practical guidance. These works make positive psychology accessible to educators, parents, and general readers.

Academic development has accelerated since 2010. Multiple universities now offer positive psychology courses. Beijing Normal University and East China Normal University include it in psychology undergraduate curricula. Many universities offer it as a public elective. The Chinese Positive Psychology Conference, held biennially since 2012, facilitates academic exchange. Research output has grown substantially, with over 500 peer-reviewed articles published between 2010-2020 [11].

Several Chinese universities have pioneered positive psychology integration. Tsinghua University's Positive Psychology Research Center has developed culturally adapted interventions showing significant effectiveness. Peking University's Student Counseling Center incorporates strength-based approaches in routine services. These early adopters provide valuable lessons for broader implementation, demonstrating both opportunities and challenges in Chinese higher education contexts.

This development provides a foundation for integrating positive psychology into college mental health education. However, systematic implementation frameworks remain limited. Most existing programs operate on small scales without institutional integration, limiting their reach and sustainability.

3. Significance for College Mental Health Education

3.1. Policy Alignment

Chinese government policies increasingly emphasize mental health education. Recent documents provide clear directives for colleges. In 2016, 22 ministries jointly issued "Guiding Opinions on Strengthening Mental Health Services," calling for improved mental health systems in education [15]. The 2018 "Guidelines for Mental Health Education of College Students" established a "four-in-one" work pattern: education, prevention, intervention, and crisis management [16].

The 2023 "Special Action Plan for Comprehensively Strengthening and Improving Students' Mental Health Work" set specific targets [17]. By 2025, colleges must achieve a 95% ratio of full-time/part-time mental health teachers. They must develop comprehensive mental health education courses and strengthen prevention and intervention systems.

Positive psychology aligns with these policies in three ways. First, it provides theoretical foundations for prevention-focused education. Traditional approaches emphasize treatment; positive psychology emphasizes prevention through strength development. Second, it offers practical methods for course development. Positive psychology curricula teach emotion regulation, strength identification, and resilience building directly addressing policy requirements. Third, it supports collaborative education mechanisms. Positive psychology emphasizes social support systems, aligning with policies calling for school-family-society collaboration.

Research demonstrates policy implementation benefits. Universities implementing positive psychology programs show 30-40% increases in student well-being and 20-25% reductions in

psychological distress [34]. Furthermore, these programs enhance help-seeking behaviors, with participating students 45% more likely to utilize mental health resources when needed. This suggests that positive psychology not only prevents problems but also reduces stigma associated with mental health services.

3.2. Addressing Traditional Education Limitations

Traditional college mental health education exhibits three limitations. First, narrow target population: services reach only students with diagnosed disorders (5-8% of total enrollment). The majority experiencing suboptimal well-being receive no support. Second, reactive approach: intervention occurs only after problems emerge, missing prevention opportunities. Third, deficit focus: emphasis on treating pathology rather than promoting optimal functioning.

These limitations create significant gaps. Survey data show that 45% of students report difficulty coping with academic pressure, while 38% struggle with interpersonal relationships [33]. However, only 12% seek professional help, citing stigma and limited service availability [2]. This gap between need and service utilization indicates systemic inadequacy.

Positive psychology addresses these limitations through three mechanisms. First, universal reach: it targets all students, not just those with disorders. Programs focus on enhancing well-being and preventing problems across the entire student population. Second, proactive prevention: interventions build psychological resources before problems emerge. Research shows that strength-based interventions reduce future psychological distress by 25-30% [29]. Third, growth orientation: emphasis shifts from treating deficits to cultivating strengths and optimal functioning.

Empirical evidence supports these benefits. A randomized controlled trial with 300 Chinese college students compared positive psychology intervention with traditional counseling [12]. Results showed that positive psychology participants reported 35% greater increases in life satisfaction and 28% greater reductions in anxiety compared to traditional counseling. Effects persisted at 6-month follow-up. Importantly, positive psychology interventions showed higher engagement rates (85% completion) compared to traditional counseling (68% completion), suggesting greater acceptability among students. Qualitative data revealed that students appreciated the focus on growth rather than pathology, finding it more empowering and less stigmatizing.

3.3. Meeting Student Needs

Contemporary college students face complex challenges. Academic competition intensifies as higher education expands. Employment pressure increases as job markets become more competitive. Social media creates new interpersonal dynamics and comparison pressures. These factors converge to create unprecedented mental health demands.

Student needs have evolved beyond basic problem-solving. Surveys indicate that 78% of students seek to enhance emotional regulation skills, 72% want to identify personal strengths, and 68% desire greater life meaning and purpose [33]. These needs reflect a shift from deficit reduction to positive development.

Positive psychology directly addresses these needs through five pathways. First, emotion regulation: teaching evidence-based techniques for cultivating positive emotions and managing negative ones. Second, strength identification: helping students discover and apply character strengths in academic and personal contexts. Third, resilience building: developing coping skills for handling stress and setbacks. Fourth, relationship enhancement: improving interpersonal skills and social connections. Fifth, meaning cultivation: exploring life purpose and values.

Research demonstrates effectiveness in meeting these needs. A study of 500 Chinese college students examined positive psychology intervention effects [4]. Participants showed significant

improvements in emotion regulation ($d = 0.42$), strength awareness ($d = 0.51$), and life meaning ($d = 0.38$). Qualitative feedback indicated high satisfaction, with 85% reporting that interventions addressed their actual needs. Follow-up assessments at 12 months showed sustained benefits, with participants maintaining 70-80% of initial gains. Students reported applying learned skills in academic challenges, interpersonal conflicts, and career planning, demonstrating broad transfer effects beyond mental health outcomes.

4. Implementation Framework

4.1. Curriculum Integration

Systematic curriculum development forms the foundation for integrating positive psychology. Colleges should establish comprehensive course systems with clear objectives and evidence-based content.

Course Structure and Content. Colleges should offer positive psychology as both required and elective courses. Required courses (2 credits, 32 hours) should cover core concepts: positive emotions, character strengths, resilience, relationships, and meaning. Elective courses can explore specialized topics: positive leadership, positive relationships, or applied positive psychology.

Content should emphasize practical application. Each module should include: theoretical foundations with empirical evidence, self-assessment tools for personal insight, evidence-based exercises for skill development, and real-world applications in academic and personal contexts. Integration with students' daily experiences enhances relevance and motivation. For example, strength identification exercises can be linked to academic major selection, while resilience training can address exam stress.

Teaching Methods. Interactive pedagogy enhances engagement and learning. Effective methods include case analysis, group discussions, experiential exercises, reflection journals, and guest lectures. Research shows that interactive methods increase knowledge retention by 40-50% compared to traditional lectures [6]. Technology-enhanced learning, such as mobile apps for daily practice tracking and online discussion forums, extends learning beyond classroom hours. Peer teaching opportunities, where students share their positive psychology practices, foster deeper understanding and community building.

Assessment Approaches. Assessment should evaluate both knowledge and application. Methods include knowledge tests, practical assignments, group projects, and portfolio development. This multi-method approach provides comprehensive evaluation while promoting continuous practice.

4.2. Experiential Learning

Positive psychology emphasizes “action orientation” the principle that practice drives change [27]. Colleges should design experiential activities enabling students to apply concepts in real contexts.

Group Training Programs. Structured group activities facilitate peer learning and support. Strength Exploration Workshops (6-8 sessions) help students complete VIA Character Strengths Survey, identify top strengths, and practice applying them. Research shows these workshops increase strength awareness by 45% and self-efficacy by 32% [24].

Gratitude Practice Groups (4-6 sessions) teach gratitude theory and practice. Studies show gratitude interventions increase life satisfaction by 18-22% [10]. **Resilience Building Programs** (8-10 sessions) teach cognitive restructuring, problem-solving, and stress management. Meta-analyses show resilience programs reduce anxiety by 25-30% [9].

Daily Practice Activities. Sustained practice builds lasting change. The Three Good Things Exercise, where students record three positive events daily for 2-4 weeks, increases happiness by 15-

20% [29]. Regular exercise (3+ times weekly) reduces depression by 20-30% [25].

Brief daily mindfulness meditation (10-15 minutes) reduces stress and improves focus. Psychological Skill Training. Students need practical tools for self-regulation. Training should cover cognitive restructuring, self-compassion, and savoring techniques. Self-compassion reduces anxiety by 20-25% and increases resilience [18]. Savoring increases positive emotions by 25-30% [1].

4.3. Faculty Development

Teacher quality determines implementation success. Colleges must build professional positive psychology faculty through recruitment, training, and support.

Recruitment Standards. New hires should meet specific criteria: Master's or doctoral degree in psychology or related fields, completion of recognized positive psychology certification programs (40+ hours), demonstrated experience delivering interventions, and genuine commitment to positive psychology principles.

Professional Development Programs. Existing faculty need systematic training. Foundational Training (40-60 hours) covers core theory, research methods, and intervention techniques. Advanced Workshops (20-30 hours annually) address specialized topics. Peer Learning Communities meet regularly for case discussion and collaborative problem-solving. Research shows peer learning increases teaching effectiveness by 25-30% [32].

Research Support. Faculty should engage in scholarship. Colleges should establish re-search funding, create research teams, support publication, and recognize research contributions in promotion decisions.

Personal Practice. Teachers must embody positive psychology principles. Colleges should encourage faculty to maintain personal practices, provide well-being resources, create supportive work environments, and recognize achievements. Faculty well-being directly impacts teaching effectiveness and student outcomes. Research shows that teachers with higher well-being demonstrate greater empathy, patience, and creativity in teaching [26]. Institutions should therefore view faculty well-being not as a luxury but as essential infrastructure for effective positive psychology education.

4.4. Institutional Support

Comprehensive implementation requires institutional commitment. Colleges must integrate positive psychology into organizational systems, culture, and policies.

Academic Policy Reform. Policies should support student well-being. Flexible Credit Systems allow students to choose courses aligned with interests and strengths. Research shows autonomy increases motivation by 30-40% [26]. Strength-Based Advising trains advisors to identify and leverage student strengths. Growth-Oriented Assessment supplements grades with improvement feedback. Mental Health Days allow students designated days for self-care without academic penalty.

Campus Culture Development. Culture shapes daily experiences. Colleges should organize positive events like annual Mental Health Month, install positive psychology message boards, support student organizations focused on well-being, and celebrate students demonstrating character strengths. Creating a culture of well-being requires consistent messaging and visible commitment from leadership. Regular campus-wide events, such as gratitude weeks or kindness challenges, normalize positive psychology practices and create shared experiences that build community. Physical environment also matters designated spaces for reflection, meditation, or social connection signal institutional commitment to student well-being.

Collaborative Networks. Mental health requires multi-stakeholder cooperation. School-Family Partnership involves regular communication through workshops and online platforms. Re-search shows family involvement increases intervention effectiveness by 35-45% [30]. School-Community

Collaboration partners with organizations for volunteer opportunities and resource sharing. Inter-University Networks share best practices and research findings. Professional Partnerships collaborate with mental health professionals and researchers.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined integrating positive psychology into Chinese college mental health education. We analyzed theoretical foundations, practical significance, and implementation strategies.

Key findings include three points. First, positive psychology provides robust theoretical foundations emphasizing prevention, strengths, and optimal functioning. Its development in China, led by scholars like Peng Kaiping, has created culturally adapted frameworks suitable for Chinese contexts. Second, positive psychology addresses critical needs in college mental health education. It aligns with national policies emphasizing prevention and comprehensive coverage. It compensates for traditional education's limitations by reaching all students and promoting positive development. It meets contemporary students' needs for emotional regulation, strength development, and meaning cultivation. Third, successful implementation requires systematic approaches across four dimensions: curriculum integration, experiential learning, faculty development, and institutional support.

Theoretical contributions include synthesizing positive psychology's relevance for Chinese higher education and proposing a comprehensive implementation framework. This framework integrates Western positive psychology with Chinese cultural values and educational contexts.

Practical implications suggest that colleges should: develop systematic positive psychology curricula with clear objectives and evidence-based content, design experiential activities enabling students to practice positive psychology in daily life, build professional faculty through recruitment, training, and support, and create institutional environments supporting positive psychology through policies, culture, and partnerships.

Limitations include three areas. First, this paper provides conceptual analysis without empirical evaluation of proposed strategies. Future research should conduct controlled trials examining implementation effectiveness across diverse institutional contexts, including comprehensive universities, vocational colleges, and specialized institutions. Second, cultural adaptation requires further exploration. While we incorporated Chinese cultural elements, more research is needed on optimal localization approaches. Specific questions include how Confucian values of harmony and collectivism interact with positive psychology's emphasis on individual strengths, and how traditional Chinese concepts like "zhong yong" (the doctrine of the mean) relate to optimal functioning. Third, long-term sustainability remains unclear. Longitudinal studies should examine whether positive psychology integration produces lasting improvements in student mental health and whether effects extend beyond graduation into professional life. Additionally, cost-effectiveness analysis would inform resource allocation decisions and support institutional commitment.

Future research should pursue three directions. First, effectiveness studies: randomized controlled trials comparing positive psychology integration with traditional approaches across multiple universities. Outcomes should include student well-being, academic performance, and mental health service utilization. Studies should also examine differential effects across student subgroups (e.g., by gender, major, year level) to identify who benefits most and how interventions can be tailored. Second, cultural adaptation research: systematic examination of how Chinese cultural values interact with positive psychology principles. This includes developing culturally specific assessment tools and intervention protocols that resonate with Chinese students' worldviews and values. Third, implementation science: investigation of factors facilitating or hindering positive psychology integration. This includes organizational readiness, leadership support, resource availability, and faculty attitudes. Understanding implementation barriers and facilitators will enable more effective

scaling of successful programs.

In conclusion, positive psychology offers promising approaches for enhancing college mental health education in China. Its emphasis on prevention, strengths, and optimal functioning addresses critical gaps in traditional services. Systematic implementation through curriculum, experiential learning, faculty development, and institutional support can create comprehensive mental health promotion systems. As Chinese higher education continues expanding, positive psychology provides valuable frameworks for supporting student well-being and development.

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