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# Leveraging Positive Psychology to Support First Year College Students: The ROCK Goes to College

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# Leveraging Positive Psychology to Support First Year College Students: The ROCK Goes to College

## **Abstract**

Each spring, students in the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at the University of Pennsylvania complete service learning projects in partnership with nonprofits from around the world. For this specific project, MAPP students collaborated with the ROCK Center for Youth Development, a nonprofit currently providing positive education and programming to middle and high school students in Midland, Michigan. The ROCK is about to begin offering its services to local universities as well and requested assistance adapting an existing workshop to better address the social and cognitive impediments to student success in college. Our literature review indicated that college students commonly struggle with stress, time management issues, and belonging uncertainty, and all three are correlated with poor outcomes across a variety of academic and well-being metrics. In contrast, social connectedness and sense of purpose are overwhelmingly linked to positive outcomes at college. Based on this research, our application plan for the ROCK recommends that they retain the sections of their existing workshop covering stress management and building positive relationships while adding three evidence-based activities detailed herein. The first activity mitigates belonging uncertainty, the second assesses and develops time management skills, and the third cultivates students' sense of academic purpose.

## **Keywords**

positive psychology, first year college students, higher education, positive connections, belonging uncertainty, purpose for learning

## **Disciplines**

Multicultural Psychology | Other Psychology | Psychology | School Psychology | Social Psychology

Running Head: THE ROCK GOES TO COLLEGE

Leveraging Positive Psychology to Support First Year College Students:  
The ROCK Goes to College

Jill Greenberg, Lauren Ogle & Kerry Sanderson

University of Pennsylvania

A Positive Psychology Service Learning Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for MAPP 702: Applied Positive Interventions

Master of Applied Positive Psychology

May 1, 2017

# THE ROCK GOES TO COLLEGE

## Leveraging Positive Psychology to Support First Year College Students: The ROCK Goes to College

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Service Learning Project

MAPP 702: Applied Positive Interventions

University of Pennsylvania

May 1, 2017

### Abstract

Each spring, students in the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at the University of Pennsylvania complete service learning projects in partnership with nonprofits from around the world. For this specific project, MAPP students collaborated with the ROCK Center for Youth Development, a nonprofit currently providing positive education and programming to middle and high school students in Midland, Michigan. The ROCK is about to begin offering its services to local universities as well and requested assistance adapting an existing workshop to better address the social and cognitive impediments to student success in college. Our literature review indicated that college students commonly struggle with stress, time management issues, and belonging uncertainty, and all three are correlated with poor outcomes across a variety of academic and well-being metrics. In contrast, social connectedness and sense of purpose are overwhelmingly linked to positive outcomes at college. Based on this research, our application plan for the ROCK recommends that they retain the sections of their existing workshop covering stress management and building positive relationships while adding three evidence-based activities detailed herein. The first activity mitigates belonging uncertainty, the second assesses and develops time management skills, and the third cultivates students' sense of academic purpose.

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## **Introduction**

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This research paper is the product of a collaboration between the ROCK Center for Youth Development (hereafter, “the ROCK”) in Midland, Michigan, and a cohort of three students from the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at the University of Pennsylvania. The ROCK requested help integrating the principles of positive psychology and positive education into a new program the ROCK is developing to support students as they transition into college. A pilot version of this program will launch this year at Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU).

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## **Situation Analysis**

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### **Overview of the College Education Sector**

The saying goes that children are our future. One could say, then, that the well-being of our nation depends on the well-being of our children. Historically, the U.S. has been renowned for its wide accessibility to opportunities and excellence within its higher education system (Cahalan & Perna, 2015). However, today that system serves only some children rather than all. Since the 1980’s, there has been the disinvestment of state funds for public colleges as well as declining funding for federal student grants, and this trend has snowballed into a higher education system marked with inequality (Cahalan & Perna, 2015).

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The real question today is *which* children are the future? Low-income students and students of color struggle the most to graduate from college. Even though more of these students are enrolling in college than ever before, too few end up completing their certificates or degrees. Given the changing demographics of the U.S., our country simply will not be economically competitive if these students don't succeed (Complete College, 2011). It is estimated that by 2020, two-thirds of all jobs will require higher education (AVID, 2017), and the US is currently on track to be 24 million postsecondary degrees short of meeting economic demand by 2025 (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2012).

Michigan in particular is struggling to produce college graduates. In 1992, Michigan ranked a respectable 13th in the nation for rates of high school graduates enrolling in college (French, 2012). By 2008, Michigan had dropped to 34th nationwide. Simultaneously, Michigan's six-year graduation rate of students at four-year universities dropped from 16th in the nation to 26th (French, 2012). Currently, only about 35% of high school graduates in Michigan complete a college certificate or degree program within six years of high school graduation, and those numbers are even lower for underrepresented, part-time, and first generation students (Michigan College Access Network, 2016).

Because Michigan students who complete college earn on average 86% more upon graduation (Roelofs, 2016), this growing college completion crisis is contributing in no small part to the fact that Michigan now has the fastest shrinking middle class in the entire country (Mack, 2016). In just one year, a single cohort of Michigan college dropouts (e.g., all those who started college in 2002 and did not graduate in six years) miss out on \$139 million in income (Schneider & Yin, 2011). Over their lifetimes, that one cohort will miss out on a total of \$5.8 billion, which means \$1.2 billion in taxes lost to the federal government and \$254 million lost to

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Michigan (Schneider & Yin, 2011). And those losses are just the tip of the iceberg because each passing year produces another cohort of college dropouts.

On top of the dire economic impact, failing to finish college also affects an individual's quality of life and that of the broader community. College graduates enjoy better physical and mental health, longer life expectancies, lower divorce rates, and generally rate themselves as happier (Trostel, 2015; Woolston, 2017). The broader community also benefits because college graduates are more likely to be active in the community, to work for nonprofits, to donate to charity, to be neighborly, and to vote and become politically active. They are also less likely to engage in criminal behavior and less likely to rely on taxpayer assistance (Trostel, 2015).

Due to the overwhelming evidence supporting the need for more college graduates, Michigan's College Access Network (MCAN) has now set a goal for 60% of Michigan's residents to have postsecondary degrees by 2025 (Michigan College Access Network, 2016).

### **Overview of the ROCK**

Founded by Beverlee Wenzel in 2001, the ROCK Center for Youth Development is a non-profit currently serving middle and high school students in Midland, Michigan. The ROCK's mission is to equip local youth with the skills, support, and environments needed to make positive life choices. The goal is to reach and serve every student (not just those who are at risk or those who can afford help), and to that end, the ROCK provides character and life skills education and out-of-school programming (i.e., after school and during summers) free of charge. The ROCK has an operating budget of \$500,000 a year (all donor-funded) and will soon have six full-time employees. They also employ approximately 35 part-time employees, and have 147 volunteers.



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The ROCK currently runs the following programs:

### 1. **ROCK Exposure**

Designed to help ensure all youth have access to the tools and skills they need to thrive, ROCK Exposure offers ten unique curricula that are taught by ROCK staff during the school day (in the classroom) at partnering schools. The curricula vary in time commitment (once a week, once a month, etc.) and subject matter, depending on the requests and preferences of the partnering schools. The majority of the curricula aims to increase development assets (which are soft skills that help students to thrive) with a heavy emphasis on character strength education. The FOCUS curriculum – the first one developed – is the ROCK’s signature offering and the most frequently requested.

ROCK Exposure operates in the four Midland school districts, along with pilot programs in Bay and Saginaw Counties, and currently serves approximately 1,000 students each year. In the last four years, the number of students served has grown 375%.

Lessons from the ROCK Exposure curricula are also now being used in a recently-developed pilot program called ROCK Positive Alternative to School Suspension (PASS). All four Midland school districts are now sending suspended kids to the ROCK to receive life skills lessons rather than sitting at home unproductively.

### 2. **ROCK Grounded**

Designed to help ensure all youth have access to a safe, pleasant, productive environment outside of school, ROCK Grounded currently offers after-school programming to 230-250 teens a day, with approximately 870 individual teens served. Students who attend enjoy a safe, supportive space and what Executive Director Beverlee Wenzel calls “intentional fun.” This includes games, crafts, sports, and tutoring – all carefully designed to promote personal and academic development. 91% of students served said attending was a good investment of their time, and 88% said they would recommend it to a friend. Attendance at ROCK Grounded locations is up 419% in the last 4 years.

ROCK Grounded is currently offered in three locations in Midland County. During the summers, these after school programs morph into "ROCK's Edge" day camps and operate according to the same goals and philosophies.

### 3. **ROCK Unplugged**

Designed to help ensure that all youth have access to engaging activities that promote positive growth and develop a sense of community, ROCK Unplugged puts on events for teens. This includes battle of the bands, lock-ins, pool parties, and rock climbing.

Both ROCK Exposure and Grounded have been found to increase internal and external developmental assets among the youth served (see Appendices A and B for the Legacy Center’s independent evaluations of these programs). Developmental assets include commitment to

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learning (enjoying reading/learning, caring about school, being open to trying new things, etc.), social competencies (building friendships, expressing feelings constructively, being sensitive to and accepting of others, etc.), positive values (having and standing up for your principles, respecting others, taking responsibility), and positive identity (optimism, self-esteem, and a sense of self-efficacy) (Scales et al., 2006).

In addition to their youth programming, the ROCK also offers "Art of Conversation" training for adults who work with adolescents. Developed in partnership with a previous MAPP cohort, the training covers how to leverage every day conversations in order to increase growth mindset, awareness/use of character strengths, and resilience in youth. 92% of the adults who received the training felt it was applicable to their work, and 87% would recommend it to others.

### **Overview of the Application of Positive Psychology at the ROCK**

Positive psychology has infused the ROCK since its inception, but not always explicitly. The organization was founded with two goals: (1) to create a new kind of after-school program for local middle- and high-school students in which the students are self-driven to participate and succeed, and (2) to equip the youth in their community with hope and resilience. From the beginning, the ROCK has always prided itself on creating learning environments rather than preaching to the kids about what they should and shouldn't do in life. The organization believes that (and has data supporting that – see Appendices A and B), if they can provide positive spaces and build character strengths like hope and resilience, the incidence of risk-taking behaviors among the students naturally declines. Rather than punishing or preaching against undesirable behaviors, the ROCK focused on changing the environmental, systemic, and institutional factors acting on them, so that undesirable activities are no longer the most natural response to growing

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up in Midland. Additionally, Wenzel has always taken a strengths-based approach to management within the organization. She recognized that people gravitate toward doing what they like and are good at and has always encouraged/leveraged that tendency among the ROCK's staff and volunteers. Thus, even before its official introduction to positive psychology, the ROCK was already using key aspects of positive psychology, including self-determination theory, character strengths, hope theory, institutional shifts, and resilience skills.

This is now the ROCK's third year participating in MAPP's service learning projects. Under the guidance of the past two MAPP cohorts, the ROCK took what they were already doing organically and made it intentional and scientific. Now their ever-expanding program offerings are all grounded in positive psychology, and their staff and volunteers are fully trained in character strengths, growth mindset, and positive life coaching -- to the point where they now provide these trainings to other adults in the community.

This year, the ROCK has requested assistance in making an ambitious leap into new territory: college. The ROCK has always intended to provide services well beyond their immediate community (Wenzel calls this "visions of grandeur"), and currently there are doors opening for them to have a broader impact by addressing the social and cognitive factors that are affecting student success in Michigan colleges. As mentioned above, only 35% of Michigan's high school graduates complete college degrees, and improving this statistic has become a focus for MCAN. Wenzel and the ROCK's program director are on MCAN's committee for improving the college completion rates and see an opportunity for the ROCK to become a preferred provider with MCAN. When colleges ask MCAN for help with completion problems, the ROCK wants to be MCAN's answer.

## Literature Review

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In line with the ROCK's goals and work, we have focused this literature review on the social and cognitive factors affecting success in college. The ROCK already has comprehensive knowledge of and programming covering many of these factors, including:

- Character strengths
- Growth mindset
- Problem solving
- Goal setting
- Happiness & well-being
- Grit
- Social emotional intelligence
- Mindfulness
- Gratitude
- Core values
- Respect for self & others
- Self-control
- Personal responsibility
- Critical thinking
- Personal mission statements

So as to put our energies where they are most useful to the ROCK, we will not be covering those topics again. Instead, we will discuss three areas in which college students often struggle and three factors that are robustly tied to success in college.

### *Common Struggles of College Students*

The transition from high school to college presents significant new challenges as roles and responsibilities change for students. They will likely face more rigorous and/or different academic demands. They may also be challenged by an unfamiliar social context, including

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trying to make new friends, building relationships with new professors and staff, and perhaps adjusting to an entirely new living situation. It is therefore quite common for colleges to offer some programmatic support for freshmen transitioning to college. In a 2016 nationwide survey polling over 18,000 freshmen, over half reported attending a college orientation seminar designed to assist in their academic/emotional adjustment (Bates & Bourke, 2016). Despite this, more than a third of those same freshman still reported that adjusting to college was difficult for them (Bates & Bourke, 2016), and attrition rates are highest during freshman year (Tinto, 1987).

Two of the most common struggles for college students are stress and time management. In a 2010 online survey, 200 students were asked to identify specific behaviors they would be interested in learning, and the top two behaviors were “managing time” (83%) and “managing stress” (81.4%) (Guo, Reznar, Long, & Lawson, 2010). On top of the typical difficulties with stress and time management, opportunity students (underrepresented minorities, low-income, and first generation college students) tend to struggle with a sense that they don’t belong at college (“belonging uncertainty”) (Walton & Cohen, p. 82, 2007). As a result, students who contend with social and economic disadvantages can experience worse college outcomes even when they enter with identical academic qualifications (Yeager et al., 2016).

### **Stress**

In a recent study of 212 college students, 75% reported that they experience at least moderate stress, and 13% reported high stress (Häfner, Stock, & Oberst, 2015). Students who felt unsuccessful in their efforts to cope with stress frequently reported difficulty completing schoolwork as a result (Phinney & Haas, 2003). Left unchecked, high levels of stress contribute to underachievement, dropout, illness, and depression (Häfner et al., 2015).

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Minority, first-generation, and low-income college students experience more stress on average than their white, middle class peers (Phinney & Haas, 2003). This is because disadvantaged students typically also face financial stressors -- the stress of balancing work and college, stress resulting from family members not understanding the difficulties of college, and the stress of family obligations -- especially if their families have a different cultural expectation of how much time children spend with family or on tasks at home (Phinney & Haas, 2003).

### **Time Management**

Time management skills are the skills related to organizing and keeping up with a range of tasks (Bembenutty, 2009). Among college students, these skills have been linked to reduced stress levels, higher grade point averages, and overall academic performance, along with greater life satisfaction, self-regulation, and self-efficacy (Bembenutty, 2009; Britton & Tesser, 1991; Häfner et al., 2015; Macan et al., 1990). Given the myriad benefits of time management skills, it is no surprise that they are highly correlated with college degree completion and freshman year retention (Macan, Shahani, Dipboye, & Phillips, 1990; Van der Meer, Jansen, & Torenbeek, 2010). It is therefore quite worrisome that in a 2016 nationwide survey polling over 18,000 freshmen, 47.2% reported difficulty with time management (Bates & Bourke, 2016).

### **Belonging Uncertainty**

Disadvantaged students (underrepresented minorities, low-income, and first generation college students) face a variety of challenges on top of stress and time management. One key challenge is “belonging uncertainty,” which is the persistent worry that one doesn’t fit in socially or academically and thus cannot succeed (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Disadvantaged students are

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prone to this worry because they often begin school feeling different from most of their peers. This might be due to having a different racial/cultural background from the majority, having financial difficulties that other students aren't dealing with, coming from a family in which no one went to college (and therefore lacking familiarity with typical college culture and bureaucratic processes), or having to juggle responsibilities other students aren't dealing with (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Belonging uncertainty typically develops during the first year of college when the self-esteem levels of all college students tend to drop steeply during fall semester freshman year due to the process of transitioning to college (Chung et al., 2014). As students get used to the new environment and find their footing, typically self-esteem levels return to higher, more stable levels for the rest of college (Chung et al., 2014). However, students who are already feeling different are prone to seeing normal difficulties during the transition to college (such as an awkward social encounter or a difficult registration process) as signs they don't belong at college (Walton & Cohen, 2007).

Belonging uncertainty is magnified if these students are subject to racism, prejudice, or stereotyping on campus. Certain insensitivities on the school's part can also compound the situation. For example, first generation students are often from working class families, which means fewer opportunities growing up to exert "choice, influence, and control" (Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012). These students therefore arrive at college used to working with and accommodating other people and being part of a community. What commonly greets them at college is a plethora of academic options and general encouragement from the college to pursue their individual passions and to customize their educational experiences. These concepts are foreign and stressful. When the colleges can anticipate this class of values and instead emphasize

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building social networks and collaborative work, the stress response among first generation students disappears (Townsend, Markus, & Phillips, 2012).

### *Key Factors in College Student Success*

#### **Social Connectedness**

At our most basic, biological level, human beings have a fundamental need to belong and to forge social connections (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). We don't thrive and often don't survive without them. This is generally true of people regardless of environment, so it is no surprise that social connectedness (and related concepts such as social capital, social support, social belonging, social engagement, and social integration) consistently and robustly predict success in college (Strom & Savage, 2014). College students who engage more frequently in social activities at school and who have more close friends tend to have higher GPAs, lower perceived stress, and higher satisfaction with their college experience (Webber, Krylow, & Zhang, 2013; Whitney, 2010). Social engagement is most critical during freshman year when students are newly separated from the support of family and friends back home and facing the many challenges involved in adjusting to the college environment (Tinto, 2006). Student feelings of connectedness and belonging in college predict higher grades; lower levels of anxiety, stress, and psychological distress at school; life satisfaction at college (which itself predicts higher retention rates); an easier time transitioning to college; and overall retention rates (Blau et al., 2015; Pigeon et al., 2015; Strayhorn, Travers, & Tillman-Kelly, 2015).

Notably, the power of social connection is also true for underrepresented and disadvantaged populations with traditionally lower retention rates, such as black males



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(Strayhorn et al., 2015). At the end of this literature review is a series of case studies of organizations that are having remarkable success increasing retention rates for disadvantaged students. It is no coincidence that all of the organizations focus heavily on forging social connections through practices like one-on-one advising, cohort bonding, and encouraging/facilitating their students' interactions with others on campus, etc.

Social connectedness for college students often means connections with peers on campus, but, critically, it also means connections with faculty and with other adults on and off campus. A close relationship with faculty has been associated with better grades, higher levels of retention, and feelings of satisfaction with the university (Allen, 1988, 1992; Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994; Nettles & Johnson, 1987; Nettles, Theony & Gosman 1986; Sedlacek, 1987; Tinto, 2006) and is important in facilitating both academic and social integration at college (Tinto, 1993). A study by Whitney (2010) that surveyed 259 college students showed that those who reported having five or more adults (parents, relatives, teachers, neighbors, advisers, etc.) to turn to during difficult times also reported significantly lower perceived stress, significantly higher life satisfaction, higher GPAs, a lower tendency of negative self-talk, and lower levels of problem drinking. For many students, staying connected to their home communities, family members, churches, or other groups from before college is crucial to persistence in college (Tinto, 2006).

### **Sense of Purpose**

Research indicates that students benefit from having a clearly articulated purpose for learning (Yeager et al., 2014). A sense of purpose helps students see that their current school work, even if it is boring or seemingly not connected to their real lives, is contributing to the

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achievement of their long-term goals (Yeager et al., 2014). In this way, purpose cultivates motivation to work hard and do well in school (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002). Purpose also provides direction. This helps students to direct their energy and resources intentionally and to navigate around obstacles without getting thrown off track (Kashdan & McKnight, 2009).

Students' sense of purpose helps them to set and pursue goals by providing the *why* – the reason they are working toward those goals. Goals can be self-oriented (for one's own benefit) or self-transcendent (for the greater good). New research has shown that setting goals that are **both** self-oriented and self-transcendent is especially powerful because it enables students to develop intrinsic motivation for everyday tasks (Yeager, Bundick, & Johnson, 2012). Students who have identified a goal for the future that is both self-oriented and self-transcendent display higher self-regulation in completing day-to-day tasks and persist longer in college (Yeager et al., 2014). Career goals can be a great example of this type of goal. A student who wants to be an engineer can have that goal **both** because engineering is a good fit for him/her personally and because engineering work can have positive impact on the broader community.

### *Case Studies: Programs/Institutions That Have Effectively Addressed Graduation Rates*

- [CUNY Accelerated Study in Associate Programs \(ASAP\)](#) is a successful program serving a consortium of New York community colleges and aimed at increasing graduation rates. Students in the ASAP program now have double the graduation rates of students at the same CUNY schools who are not in the program. Some aspects of the ASAP program are outside the ROCK's services (e.g., offering financial aid), but many of ASAP's successful practices could easily serve as a model for the ROCK's college program, including building cohorts within the program, fostering close relationships between the

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students and ASAP advisers, and designing all interactions to foster hope and growth mindset. Please click on the link above for a detailed 2016 report on ASAP's successes and methods. ASAP also has teaching materials available [here](#) and [here](#).

- The [Sponsors for Educational Opportunity \(SEO\) Scholars Program](#) is a successful program serving low-income and first generation students in New York City and San Francisco through high school and college all the way to college graduation. SEO Scholars have a 100% college acceptance rate, and 90% of the SEO Scholars graduate from college. During college, the SEO program supports students by providing them with College Persistence Advisors (CPAs) who do one-on-one advising and put on college skills/tools workshops. An [entire book](#) has been written on the SEO program and its methods.
- [InsideTrack](#) coaches college students in developing a sense of academic purpose, time management, self-advocacy, and study skills. [A Stanford study](#) found that these coaching interventions significantly increased retention and graduate rates over and above other interventions (e.g. increased financial aid).

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### Application Plan

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#### *The College Program*

Before this service learning project began, the ROCK had already agreed to pilot a training program on social and cognitive skills at Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU). SVSU representative Calvin Talley is hoping the ROCK can increase persistence and completion

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rates among SVSU students by helping them to “understand who they are, what they want, and how to get there” (personal communication, March 9, 2017).

The ROCK’s Executive Director Beverlee Wenzel had in mind basing this college pilot program on the ROCK’s most popular existing curriculum, FOCUS, which is offered as a component of EXPOSURE to middle and high school students. FOCUS covers a wide range of topics such as character strengths, growth mindset, problem-solving, goal-setting, well-being, grit, social-emotional intelligence, mindfulness, gratitude, values, respect for self and others, self-control, personal responsibility, critical thinking, and personal mission statements. The workshop is flexible in terms of time commitment (once a week, once a month, etc.) and subject matter, depending on the requests and preferences of the partnering schools. As Wenzel says, the ROCK offers its programming to schools “à la carte.”

Executive Director Beverlee Wenzel requested MAPP’s help in customizing the existing FOCUS workshop to address the social and cognitive factors influencing college students. The ROCK is hoping a successful deployment of this new college program at SVSU will open the door to serving other Michigan colleges in the future. Therefore, while this new college-customized program should address SVSU’s needs, the college program should be broadly applicable to many universities.

Given all these considerations, our application plan focuses on tailoring the FOCUS workshop to college students. The ROCK should be able to use this college-customized program at SVSU and any future partner colleges. We have also created a **Positive College Scorecard** (see Appendix A) to help the ROCK and its partner colleges assess what beneficial skills and qualities are already being cultivated on campus and in what areas further development by the ROCK is most needed.

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### ***When, Where, and How to Apply the College Program***

The ROCK intends to begin its work at colleges with a pilot program at Saginaw Valley State University (SVSU) within the next six months. When the ROCK and SVSU first conceived of this pilot program, they had in mind that the ROCK would teach its FOCUS workshop to groups of 30 SVSU students in two four-hour sessions.

During discussions with Wenzel and SVSU Representative Calvin Talley, we all agreed that a college-customized FOCUS workshop would be best deployed at freshman orientation in the summer (alongside SVSU's existing orientation program) and as an elective workshop (alongside the workshops SVSU already offers to students) throughout the school year. The ROCK can begin teaching these workshops during the upcoming (2017-18) school year.

Because students tend to struggle with social and cognitive issues most acutely during freshman year (especially fall of freshman year when students are managing the transition to college life), we suggest the ROCK prioritize offering its workshops to freshmen and time the workshops to occur early in the year.

### ***What Material Should Be Included in the College Program***

The established FOCUS curriculum already covers many of the internal and interpersonal skills that matter to college students, but the curriculum was not developed with college students specifically in mind. In our literature review, we identified that college students commonly struggle with stress, time management, and belonging uncertainty. We also identified two key factors that predict student success at college: social connectedness and sense of purpose.

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Therefore, we suggest:

- 1) Modifying the FOCUS curriculum by adding activities that address belonging uncertainty, time management, and sense of purpose.
- 2) Prioritizing existing FOCUS activities that address stress management and social connectedness.

### *Adding a Social Belonging Activity to FOCUS*

The FOCUS curriculum does not currently address students' sense of belonging. Given the overwhelming importance of social belonging and social connectedness to student success (see the literature review), we recommend adding the following belonging activity to the FOCUS curriculum. This activity has been shown in several powerful studies to ward off belonging uncertainty, thereby helping to close the persistence/achievement gap between disadvantaged and advantaged students (Walton & Cohen, 2007; Walton & Cohen, 2011; Yeager et al., 2016).

#### **Activity Goals:**

1. To impart the message that struggling when one first attends school is **normal**, and the experience **will improve** with time.
2. To impart the message that belonging uncertainty is **normal**, and the experience **will improve** with time.

The idea is that knowing and believing those two things will prevent students from viewing struggles during the transition to college as proof that they (the students) are fundamentally unsuited to college (Walton & Cohen, 2007, Yeager et al., 2016).

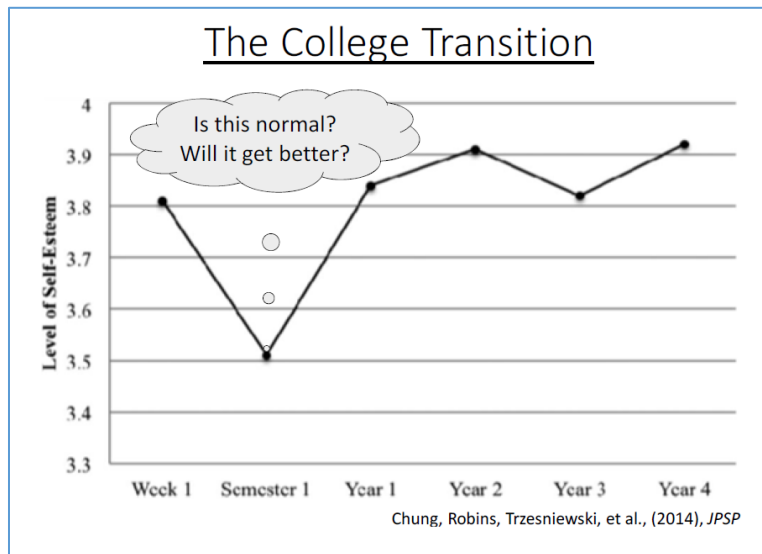
**Activity Description:**

A two-part, 30-45 minute activity delivered to students before or during the first year of college.

**Part I – Reading:**

Ask students to read materials that include (a) statistics/survey results describing how students experience the transition to college, and (b) stories/quotes purportedly from upper year students that describe how the experience of feeling different or out of place is normal for many first year students and that things will improve over time.

- Sample survey graph from David Yeager:



- Sample quote from David Yeager (Yeager et al., 2016):

“When I got into UT, I was so excited about becoming a student at such a great place. But sometimes I also worried I might be different from other UT students. And when I got to campus, sometimes it felt like everyone else knew they were right for UT, but I wasn’t sure if I fit in. At some point, I realized that almost everyone comes to UT uncertain whether they fit in or not. Now it seems ironic—everybody comes to UT and feels they are different from everybody else, when really in at least some ways we are all pretty similar. Since I realized that, my experience at UT has been almost one-hundred percent positive.”  
-Sophomore [race and gender matched to participant]

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- Sample quote from Gregory Walton (Walton & Cohen, 2011):

Freshman year, even though I met large numbers of people, I didn't have a small group of close friends. I had to work to find lab partners and people to be in study groups with. I was pretty homesick, and I had to remind myself that making close friends takes time. Since then . . . I have met people, some of whom are now just as close as my friends in high school were.

### **Part II – Writing:**

Because endorsing a message increases buy-in to that message, ask students to write a response to the question, “How has what you just read been true for you in your experience?” Tell the students that their writing will be shared with future students in order to comfort them during their college transitions.

### **Activity Tips:**

- Student participants should be told that they are being asked to share their experiences in making the transition to college because they (the participants) have valuable perspectives on something all first-year students face. The participants should not feel singled out as people who are struggling.
  - An example of language for the writing exercise, framed as a survey to students, from David Yeager (Yeager et al., 2016):

This survey will give you an opportunity to learn more about current students' experiences of going to college.

And because we value your point of view, we'll ask you to share your personal thoughts and feelings about going to college too. The findings of this survey will then be shared anonymously with future high school graduates like you so they'll know what to expect.



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- Student participants should be told they are creating materials to help future students. Be clear that the participants are benefactors in this activity, not beneficiaries. Yeager and his colleagues (2016) found that telling students something is good for them is not as motivating as telling students that their participation will be good for another student.
- If possible, before deploying this activity, assemble a focus group of older college students at the target college. Ask them for help tweaking the activity's reading materials so they sound authentic, resonate with activity participants, and speak to their actual worries.
  - Frank advice from David Yeager (personal communication, October 22,2016) on this:

*Crowd source the intervention creation. Create a crappy version. Tell students it's not good. Then ask them to write a better version. Then show the next student group that improved version. Do that 2-3 times. You'll have a good survey in like 3 days with a bit of final tweaking.*

- Make sure the examples provided in the reading represent a wide variety of students. Don't inadvertently feed stereotypes by sending the message that struggling and belonging uncertainty are only true of disadvantaged/minority students. The goal is to make both seem normal for everyone.
- Be careful not to suggest that students should feel like they don't belong or that they are struggling.
- Be careful not to suggest that college itself is inherently difficult. The difficulty is the transition to college, which is temporary.

### **Additional resources for belonging activity customization options:**

- Belonging Training For Teachers:  
<https://www.mindsetkit.org/belonging>
- Running a Belonging Discussion:  
<http://www.psychologicalscience.org/redesign/wp->

<content/uploads/2014/02/Belonging.pdf>

- Belonging Measurement Tools:  
[http://gregorywalton-stanford.weebly.com/uploads/4/9/4/4/49448111/belonging\\_belonginguncertainty.pdf](http://gregorywalton-stanford.weebly.com/uploads/4/9/4/4/49448111/belonging_belonginguncertainty.pdf)

### ***Adding a Time Management Activity to FOCUS***

Though there are many studies highlighting the importance of time management to academic success and overall well-being (see our literature review), we could find no conclusive study describing a time management intervention with significant effects across an entire population. This is not to say that time management training is never helpful – only that there appears to be no magic bullet that works for most people.

As such, we recommend adding a 30-minute time management component to FOCUS that is designed to introduce time management technique options and to help students discover what works best individually for them. To that end:

- We have included an evidence-based self-assessment questionnaire example (see Appendix B) to help students become more aware of their overall time management abilities. Many of the questions themselves suggest behavioral adjustments, such as setting goals each day, which students may find helpful.
- We suggest having a discussion/reflection about which aspect of time management students would like to improve, and based on their individual priorities, having them select a new time management technique to try that appeals to them ([here](#) is a long list of options).

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We also recommend adding a mention of time management when the FOCUS program currently discusses mindfulness, stress management, self-regulation, and SMART goals.

Specifically:

- During mindfulness and self-regulation, note the strong emotional component of procrastination/task-aversion or excitement/enticement. Students who are more aware/mindful of how and which moods affect their ability to complete their tasks will be better able to manage themselves.
- SMART goal-setting already links specific tasks to time in a way that is highly relevant to time management.
- Mindfulness can help students become more aware of the limits of their powers of concentration, which can inform time management. For example, a student who knows she can't concentrate for more than an hour before having diminishing returns will be unlikely to schedule herself to complete an entire assignment in a single four-hour session.
- Similarly, stress management skills combined with mindfulness can help students become aware of how to restore their mood and concentration and to plan time for those activities when necessary.

### ***Adding a Purpose for Learning Activity to FOCUS***

As mentioned in the literature review above, a sense of purpose can help students to succeed in college. Purpose helps students by promoting motivation, intentional choices, self-regulation in completing daily tasks, and overall persistence in college. Identifying one's purpose and using it to set goals that are both self-oriented (for one's own benefit) and self-transcendent (for the greater good) is particularly powerful. The FOCUS curriculum does not

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currently include a section focused on identifying purpose, so we suggest adding the following activity.

This activity, called **Career Here**, guides students through the process of linking a self-oriented (in this case, strengths-aligned) career goal to a specific, self-transcendent purpose for learning.

### **Activity Goals:**

1. Use signature strengths to determine fulfilling career choices
2. Discuss how students would like to more broadly impact the community
3. Recognize why setting purpose is important, including staying focused when faced with challenges
4. Link career goals (#1) and self-transcendent goals (#2) to create a purpose for learning
5. Link purpose for learning to current course content
6. Connect to on-campus and community resources for support, which also contributes to social connectedness

### **Activity Description:**

A two-part, 30-45 minute activity delivered to students before or during the first year of college.

### **Part I – Signature Strengths:**

FOCUS already includes a robust segment on assessing and exploring one's signature character strengths, including a group discussion on linking strengths to career decisions. We suggest adding to that discussion the following prompts to help students to think about how they might leverage their signature strengths in order to benefit others:

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- What is something you see in your community that you would like to fix? How can you leverage your strengths to start solving that problem?
- How in the past have you made a difference and how much did that connection to a bigger purpose influence your desire to be in college?
- When you use one of your strengths to help someone, how do you feel? Who else do you think could benefit from your strengths?

### **Part II – Career Here**

After the signature strengths discussion, we suggest adding the following activity, called “Career Here,” to the FOCUS curriculum. Career Here is an interactive discussion of how to align students’ signature strengths, values, and self-transcendent goals identified in Part I to articulate a learning purpose.

- Open the discussion with the following quote:

*“It’s only when you hitch your wagon to something bigger than yourself that you realize your true potential and discover the role you’ll play in writing the next great chapter in the American story.”* -President Barack Obama, Wesleyan University Commencement Speech, 2008 (retrieved from <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=77361>)

- Ask students to pair up and share their answers to the following questions:
  - Do you know what career you want? Why?
  - How does it align with your strengths and values?
  - How does doing this job make people’s lives better?
  - How does doing this job make your community better?
- Bring the class back together to discuss their answers together.
- After the class discussion, ask students to complete a writing task capturing their answers to the following prompts:

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- Complete the following statement: **I will become a** (fill in the career you have chosen) **because I can make people’s lives better by** (fill in the impact you will have) – this is your **purpose for learning!**
- List the classes you are taking and for each answer this question:
  - Why is learning this subject important to my purpose?
  - How will it help me make people’s lives better?
  - What might be challenging in this class, and how will remembering my purpose for learning help me face this challenge?
  - Who on campus might be able to help me work toward my purpose for learning (a faculty member, a staff member, a department with useful resources)?

### *Prioritizing Stress and Social Connectedness During FOCUS Workshops*

In our literature review, we covered the overwhelming evidence on the importance of both stress management and social connectedness to student success in college. The FOCUS curriculum already has a thorough stress management component. Similarly, it also already does a great deal to help students form strong social connections by covering social-emotional intelligence, self-control, relationship skills, and leaning on one’s social network for both stress relief and for help. Therefore, rather than altering or adding to these topics, we suggest only that the ROCK prioritize delivering this content in situations where some content triage must be performed, such as new student orientation and other occasions where the ROCK likely won’t have eight hours to deliver the full FOCUS curriculum.

**Conclusion**

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The ROCK is in an exciting position to offer unique and much-needed services to Michigan college students. The opportunities, tools, and best practices described herein should assist in rolling out a smooth and impactful pilot effort at Saginaw Valley State University. We hope success at SVSU will open doors for the ROCK to partner with other local colleges and that this application plan will continue to prove useful in all these ventures in years to come.

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**Appendix A – Positive College Scorecard**

The following personal skills and qualities can play a key role in academic success. Please indicate which of these you are already cultivating at your school and to what extent. If you are unfamiliar with any of the terms, please mark a zero for that item.

<b>SKILL/QUALITY</b>	<b>RATING</b> How well are you cultivating this at your school? Rate from 0 (lowest) to 5.	<b>TOUCHPOINTS</b> Where, when, and by whom is this cultivated?
Growth Mindset		
Knowledge & Use of Character Strengths		
Social Belonging & Connectedness		
Sense of Self-Efficacy		
Time Management		
Goal-setting		
Stress Management		
Resilience		
Learning Purpose		
Grit		
Social-emotional Intelligence		
Mindfulness		
Gratitude		

**Appendix B – Time Management Questionnaire**

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The Time Management Questionnaire (TMQ) was originally developed by Britton and Tesser (1991) and has since been used by dozens of researchers investigating time management. In 2012, a comprehensive review of existing measurements of time management ability found the TMQ to be one of the most accurate and useful measurements available (Hellsten, 2012).

**Short-Range Planning**

1. Do you make a list of the things you have to do each day?
  - Always
  - Frequently
  - Sometimes
  - Infrequently
  - Never
  
2. Do you plan your day before you start it?
  - Always
  - Frequently
  - Sometimes
  - Infrequently
  - Never
  
3. Do you make a schedule of the activities you have to do on workdays?
  - Always
  - Frequently
  - Sometimes
  - Infrequently
  - Never
  
4. Do you write a set of goals for yourself for each day?
  - Always
  - Frequently
  - Sometimes
  - Infrequently
  - Never
  
5. Do you spend time each day planning?
  - Always
  - Frequently
  - Sometimes

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- Infrequently
- Never

6. Do you have a clear idea of what you want to accomplish during the next week?

- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

7. Do you set and honor priorities?

- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

### **Time Attitudes**

8. Do you often find yourself doing things which interfere with your schoolwork simply because you hate to say "No" to people?\*

- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

9. Do you feel you are in charge of your own time, by and large?

- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

10. On an average class day do you spend more time with personal grooming than doing schoolwork?\*

- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

11. Do you believe that there is room for improvement in the way you manage your time?\*

- Always
- Frequently



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- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

12. Do you make constructive use of your time?

- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

13. Do you continue unprofitable routines or activities?\*

- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

### **Long-Range Planning**

14. Do you usually keep your desk clear of everything other than what you are currently working on?

- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

15. Do you have a set of goals for the entire quarter?

- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

16. The night before a major assignment is due, are you usually still working on it?\*

- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

17. When you have several things to do, do you think it is best to do a little bit of work on each one?

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- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

18. Do you regularly review your class notes, even when a test is not imminent?

- Always
- Frequently
- Sometimes
- Infrequently
- Never

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### Time Management Questionnaire Scoring

For questions 8, 10, 11, 13, and 16, assign the following points:

- 1 = Always
- 2 = Frequently
- 3 = Sometimes
- 4 = Infrequently
- 5 = Never

For all other questions, assign the following points:

- 5 = Always
- 4 = Frequently
- 3 = Sometimes
- 2 = Infrequently
- 1 = Never

Add up all your points within each subsection:

- Short Range Planning Score = /35
- Time Attitudes Score = /30
- Long Range Planning Score = /25

Add up all three subsection scores:

- Grand total = /90

The higher the score, the greater the time management abilities.\*

*\*It is ordinarily helpful to provide some sense of what scores mean (e.g., a score of 0-30 is worrisome, a score of 31-60 is normal, and a score of 61-90 is excellent). We could not find TMQ results for populations comparable to Michigan college students in order to provide this information here. Therefore, we suggest that the ROCK keep a record of TMQ results received by students in the ROCK's workshops. With enough data from its own workshops, the ROCK will be able to provide an indication to future students of which scores on the TMQ are typical, unusually low, or unusually high.*

### Appendix C – Measurement

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In order to track the results of their efforts and to improve, we ask practitioners such as the ROCK to develop and implement a good measurement and feedback plan. This allows the field to build credibility, stay relevant, and report effect sizes (Vella-Brodrick, 2014).

The partnership between the ROCK and SVSU has been formed with the intention of enhancing programming that supports retention and completion. SVSU already tracks these numbers, including:

- 1) the number of students who are retained in their programs from semester to semester versus those that do not return to the college.
- 2) the number of students that complete their intended program and graduate in their senior year or subsequent fifth or sixth year (for those not attending full-time) versus those that do not.

In order to measure the effect of the ROCK's programming, we recommend tracking how students going through the ROCK programming compare to the versus the general college population on the above metrics. We also recommend comparing SVSU's rates on these measure to the overall rates of retention and graduation for peer colleges in Michigan and in the United States.

In addition to the broader goals of increased retention and completion, the FOCUS college program is intended to increase specific skills and attributes. SVSU currently uses an assessment instrument called *Success Navigator* that measures four major psychosocial general skills and 10 related subskills that are directly related to success and persistence in college. These include academic skills, commitment, self-management and social support (retrieved from

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<https://www.ets.org/successnavigator/about>, 2017). Though we do not have access to Success Navigator, SVSU Representative Cal Talley indicated that there is significant crossover between the Success Navigator skills and the skills/attributes targeted by the FOCUS program and that the Success Navigator assessment can be administered each semester (C. Talley, personal communication, March 9, 2017). We therefore recommend SVSU and the ROCK track the ROCK's effects on student skills and attributes using the Success Navigator instrument.

Additionally, research shows that certain social, cognitive, and behavioral factors are far more predictive of academic success than are measures of IQ such as GPA, SAT scores, and math assessments (Apple, Duncan, & Ellis, 2015). We recommend the following measurement(s) of powerful success predictors be taken before the ROCK's college program begins, during the program, and several months after it ends to examine the program's effects.

<b>Tool</b>	<b>Description</b>
<a href="#">Optimism Test</a> <a href="#">Learned Optimism Test</a>	Measures student's optimism about their future (Authentic Happiness, 2017).
<a href="#">Grit Scale</a>	Measures how passionate and persevering students see themselves to be (Duckworth, 2017).
<a href="#">Sense of Community Scale</a>	Results are a strong predictor of participation by measure of four elements: membership, influence, meeting needs, and a shared emotional connection (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008).