

# How Extracurricular Activities Help Build College Students' Positive Psychology

## -- A Qualitative Study

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### Abstract

**Positive psychology can positively influence Chinese vocational college students in many different ways such as correcting students' behaviors and building students' confidence, while most colleges only teach positive psychology in traditional classes or training programs and ignore the extracurricular activities. This empirical study aims at filling the academic gap by applying a qualitative research methodology. Eight college students who have taken positive psychological courses were invited to share their experiences of attending extracurricular activities. According to the contributions of research participants, five super themes have been created. These findings clearly explain how extracurricular activities can help build students' positive attitudes from five different aspects. As one of the pioneer studies focusing on building vocational college students' positive psychology, this study is meaningful by laying a solid foundation with empirical data for future studies in the same direction to build up.**

### Keywords

**College students, positive psychology, extracurricular activities, qualitative study.**

### 1. Introduction

Positive psychology is a relatively new subject that studies and explores the key factors that contribute to the success of individuals[1]. Many scholars have well discussed the effectiveness and functions of positive psychology in helping students improve grades and enhance their communication skills with empirical data. For example, Wade, Marks, and Hetzel point out that positive psychology can lead students to success in a variety of dimensions such as physical health and income[2]. Huang Believes that positive psychology can help increase students' learning interests[3]. Lin and Ke argue that Chinese college students with positive psychology are more likely to have better jobs after graduation[4]. These studies have demonstrated the usefulness and effectiveness of positive psychology on college students.

Although many studies have shown the effectiveness of positive psychology on Chinese college students from different dimensions, it does not mean that building Chinese college students' positive psychology is well developed. On the contrary, as a relatively new concept, positive psychology has not widely been used in many Chinese colleges and waits for further exploration and application. College faculty and staff who are unfamiliar with positive psychology wonder how to apply the psychological theory into the real world and make it work effectively for helping students. One traditional approach that some Chinese colleges often take is to design positive psychology as an elective course or a training program so students can learn skills and knowledge from experienced psychological teachers step by step. It is a practical way to apply positive psychology to help students, but there are a few downsides in this approach. First and foremost, this approach relies heavily on the classroom and ignore the importance of other activities, while building positive psychology is a whole process of which the traditional class is

merely a step. Other activities also play an influential role in developing the mental health of students, such as student organizations, sports, and debates[5]. What is more, traditional lectures highlight the significance of lecturers but not student-centered, whereas healthy mind-building requires a strong engagement of students. The weak engagement of college students makes the teacher-centered lectures of positive psychology hard to achieve teaching goals and sometimes even may dismay teachers' enthusiasm.

Thus, building college students' positive psychology must not rely only upon the traditional lectures focusing on complex and equivocal psychological theory, but students need to have opportunities to practice the theory and skills that they learn from classes in the real world. Without practice, psychological theories are just words and difficult concepts. That is why extracurricular activities play a crucial role in forging students' healthy psychology. The forms of extracurricular activities could be various. Any student activities that fall outside of the traditional curriculum of schools are extracurricular activities, including sports, student newspapers, interest-based clubs, and student governments[6]. Many scholars and teachers have discussed how college students benefit from attending these extracurricular activities. Holloway argues that college students can have their behavior problems reduced by joining athletic games with peers[7]. Brown explains that students' participation in school activities can lead to higher self-esteem[8]. Their studies prove the positive effects of extracurricular activities on students, but how extracurricular activities work to help vocational college students build a more positive attitude remains unclear for scholars and educators. The goal of this research is to fill the research gap with empirical data and in-depth discussions, so educators and decision-makers of colleges can have a deeper understanding of how to use an integrated approach to better help students build positive psychology.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1. Research Question**

To have a deeper understanding of how college students build their positive psychology in attending different forms of extracurricular activities, this study makes the research question as follows. How do college students who have taken courses in positive psychology self-evaluate the functions and usefulness of extracurricular activities in building their healthy psychology?

### **2.2. Qualitative Research Method**

As the goal of this study is to build a deep understanding of the functions and working mechanisms of extracurricular activities in leading college students to positive psychology, the nature of the research study requires a qualitative method. There are two main advantages of applying a qualitative approach in this study. First of all, a qualitative research method can allow scholars to gather more data than a quantitative research approach. With the more detailed descriptive data, scholars are more likely to have a deeper understanding of the question that they are studying, while numerical data may not allow scholars to have an in-depth data analysis[9]. Moreover, the descriptive data are more likely to enable scholars to find some new factors that other scholars neglected previously[10]. Thus, after careful consideration and discussions with experts in the field, the qualitative method is chosen for this study.

### **2.3. Research Participants**

This study has employed a purposeful sampling strategy in the data collection process. Research participants have to meet the following two requirements. First of all, all participants have to be current vocational college students. Secondly, only students with knowledge of positive psychology are eligible for participating in this study. The rationale of the two choosing

conditions is to secure the quality, validity, and accuracy of this research study. As researchers are vocational college teachers, we soon recruited eight students who are interested in participating in this research study voluntarily. Four male students and four female students invited to share their experiences of extracurricular activities' effect on building their positive psychology. The ratio of male and female participants is 1:1. All students are over 18. Four participants are in their second year of college and the other half in the third year. Although they are all from the same college, they have different majors. The demographic information of research participants lists in the following data table, but their names change to numbers for protection.

**Table 1.** Experimental data of sensor measurement accuracy

Participant	Gender	Grade	Major	GPA
1	M	2	Communication	3.74
2	M	2	Digital Publishing	3.66
3	M	3	Management	3.56
4	M	3	Finance	3.64
5	F	2	Accountancy	3.80
6	F	2	Packing and Design	3.71
7	F	3	English	3.60
8	F	3	Culture Studies	3.52

## 2.4. Data Collection

The researchers spent about three weeks to collect research data. During the data collection process, eight research participants participated in face-to-face, half-structured, and open-ended questions-led interviews. As all participants are Chinese students, so the interview language is Chinese Mandarin. Seven interviews conducted in empty classrooms with one exception, which took place in the researcher's office. With the consent of participants, all the interviews were recorded by the researcher's smartphones. The length of the interviews ranges from 47 to 76 minutes, with 54 minutes on average.

## 2.5. Data Analysis

The in-depth conversations with eight research participants produced 41 pages of research data, which are about 38 thousand Chinese words. In the data analysis process, this study followed the three-phases coding procedure[11]. In the first phase, the whole research data were reviewed carefully by the researcher. Sentences containing the same meaning were marked and later grouped into the same category. In the second phase, the researcher explained the meaning of each group and made a theme for each group. Groups having similar meanings and thoughts were combined in this phase. The last stage is a re-exam phase in which all groups were checked again and the low-frequent groups were discarded. The low-frequent groups refer to a similar feeling reported by less than half of the research participants.

## 2.6. Findings

The goal of this research study is to have a deep understanding of how vocational college students benefit from extracurricular activities in building their positive psychology. To answer the research question, eight Chinese college students who have taken courses in positive psychology were invited to share their experiences and thoughts in face-to-face, in-depth interviews. The transcripts of research interviews were analyzed with the three-phased qualitative approach. According to the data, five research themes were identified as follows: 1)

develop better relationships with peers and teachers, 2) enhance problem-solving skills, 3) increase communication skills, 4) become more open-minded, and 5) improve self-efficacy.

### **3. Discussion**

#### **3.1. Develop Better Relationships with Peers and Teachers**

All research participants discussed the positive effect of extracurricular activities in helping them build better relationships with peers and teachers. They believe that better relationships with peers and teachers can help them reduce the pressures from both study and life and cultivate them a more positive attitude. Chinese culture highlights the importance of relationships[12]. Harmonious relationship as a concept is always promoted in the Chinese community[13]. Extracurricular activities provide students many opportunities to integrate themselves into interest-based groups, so they can use knowledge of positive psychology to make friends. In extracurricular activities, college students also take the chance to develop a rapport with their teachers. Due to the heavy workload, many college teachers face more than one hundred students and the time that they allocate to each student is relatively limited, but students can use extracurricular activities as a means to approach their teachers. Building good relationships with teachers can benefit vocational college students in many ways. First of all, college students can learn more from their teachers, from professional knowledge to theory in use. Then, teachers may provide many job positions to the students that they know when the graduation season comes.

#### **3.2. Enhance Problem-Solving Skills**

Seven out of eight research participants mentioned that their problem-solving skills were enhanced by the extracurricular activities in which they participated, which helps build their more positive attitudes. Problem-solving skills include many aspects that call for lots of practice. For example, the first step of resolving a problem is to identify the problem and analyze it carefully to find the essence of the problem but not the factors on the superficial level[14]. Extracurricular activities offer college students opportunities to practice these skills. One participant shared his story about how his skills have sharpened in the student organization. He said that in the student association his role is a team leader and the goal of this team is to help students from the poor areas. In the beginning, he found that students from the poverty regions were less interested in participating in some events that their team organized, then he started discussing with those students and tried to understand why these students were less interested. Through discussions with targeted students and reform the events by following these students' suggestions, more students came to their events and activities. The research participant did not only improve his problem-solving skills but he also became more confident in turning positive attitude into fruits.

#### **3.3. Increase Communication Skills**

The findings show that the communication skills of all research participants have been enhanced through attending extracurricular activities, although in some people's perspective, some activities such as sports may not produce too many vocal communications. One research participant shared her story about her communication skills sharpened in a sports club that she attended. She believed that to win a game, team members have to work together closely and exchange their thoughts, strategies, and feelings. Through the communication process, college students can learn how to organize their words logically and sell their ideas to their friends and teammates. At the same time, they have to listen to the feedback and comments from their teammates and learn to respect others. The communication process is a practice process in which a more positive, open-minded, pluralistic, and engaged attitude grows in students.

### 3.4. Become More Open-Minded

Narrow-minded thought, or one-way mind, is a common issue faced by many young men, especially college students. Narrow-minded people are generally resistant to any changes and new ideas and often believe that they are right and anyone else is wrong[15]. Many factors can cause the narrow-minded thought such as mental illness, past negative experiences, and low self-esteem[16]. Narrow-minded can lead to many behavioral and psychological problems, but being narrow-minded is not permanent. A narrow-minded person can open up his mind by learning, thinking, communicating, and practicing. The research findings indicate that extracurricular activities offer students such a chance of helping them to open up their hearts. By participating in various activities and communicating with people from different cultural backgrounds, most research participants became more open-minded and embrace new knowledge and experiences. Six out of eight participants mentioned that they have learned to respect differences and are more willing to listen to other people's stories, thoughts, and feelings.

### 3.5. Improve Self-efficacy

Self-efficacy plays an important role in influencing not only students' learning outcomes but also the development of students' psychological health. As Chinese vocational students do not have good scores from the Chinese College Entrance Exam (Gaokao), most vocational college students have relatively low self-efficacy[17]. Low self-efficacy brings problems to hinder college students from achieving their best learning experiences. The biggest problem caused by low self-efficiency is that students underestimate their ability so hugely that they often choose to give up without trying when encountering difficulties. According to the research findings, by attending the extracurricular activities, students can re-build their confidence and thus improve their self-efficacy. As students finished some small tasks and easy jobs in these activities, their confidence started growing and they would re-evaluate their ability. Hence, when these students face more difficult tasks, as they have more faith in themselves, they are more likely to give a try.

## 4. Conclusion

Like other research studies, this research study has its downsides. First and foremost, as this research study used a qualitative approach focusing on the depth of the data but not the width, only eight vocational students were invited in this study. The eight research participants are all from the same college, so the experiences of research participants may face a homogenous problem. For example, students from other different colleges may have different experiences and thoughts from attending extracurricular activities. However, eight research participants can be accepted as a good number for a qualitative study as the large size of participants may hurt the study with massive data[18]. Thus, the researcher believes that more empirical studies should be done for further exploring the correlation between students' positive psychology and extracurricular activities

Although this study has its flaws, it lays a solid foundation for future research in the same area. The findings of this research study are relatively rich. According to the findings of this research study, students' positive psychology can be built by extracurricular activities from five different aspects. It strongly implies that vocational college should make a comprehensive approach that integrates both traditional classes and extracurricular activities when helping students develop positive psychology.

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