

## WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE HAPPY IN HIGHER ED?

In higher education circles, *happiness* doesn't get much play. While there's plenty of talk about student satisfaction, parental expectations, faculty morale, administrative attitudes, and legislative resolve, we don't ask basic questions about what it means to be happy in academia.

Perhaps discussions of happiness in higher ed are misplaced. After all, we're not here to make anybody happy; we're here to get stuff done. There's teaching and learning to accomplish. Scholarship to undertake. Committee work to endure. Policies to implement. Dollars and people to manage.

Furthermore, concern about what makes for happy students can lead us toward that education model most despised by faculty: consumerism. Whether it's alleged over-reliance on imperfect teaching evaluations or questionable prioritization of scarce resources (climbing wall versus biology lab), institutional attention to improving student satisfaction sometimes evokes faculty displeasure. The syllogistic snark might unfold thus: "If students are customers, and the customer is always right, then why bother?" Such cynicism would have us sidestep meaningful considerations of happiness in higher ed, returning us to more serious matters.

But if essayists are persistent and persistence is a virtue, then a virtuous essayist would encourage you, dear reader, to ponder your own happy times. As a student, they may have come when you aced a seemingly impossible exam, or earned praise from a respected professor, or were initiated into Phi Kappa Phi. For faculty members, happy times are associated with landing that first job, or getting that grant, or earning tenure. Happiness also pervades commencement ceremonies: students, faculty, administrators, parents, trustees — all are smiles and good cheer, celebrating the success of yet another class.

Considering these gladsome occasions associated with campus life, I can't help but notice an association between elation and alleviation. As a commencement speaker once remarked, "You students and family members look almost as happy as you are relieved." (It was true!) Could it be that higher-ed-happy is primarily a response to the easing of higher-ed-stress? If so, what kind of happy is that?

Additional contemplation has me equating higher-ed-happy with

success. As lifelong learners, serious thinkers, and reliable (over)achievers, we enjoy tackling thorny topics and solving tough problems — including many of the vexing administrative and political challenges that thwart our professional efforts and consequently make us unhappy in our work. For us, the words of Franklin D. Roosevelt ring true: "Happiness lies in the joy of achievement and the thrill of creative effort." Much of our happiness emerges out of doing well and succeeding.

To this I would add doing good. So many in higher education are driven by a desire to improve the lives of others, a sentiment embodied in our Society's mission: "To recognize and promote academic excellence in all fields of higher education and to engage the community of scholars in service to others." Creation, achievement, engagement, service. These bring a sense of accomplishment and joy.

Regardless of what lies ahead in the increasingly politicized world of higher education, may we all strive to do well, do good, and be unabashedly happy.

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