

A photograph of three students in a library or study area. A young man in a plaid shirt is looking at a document held by a young woman in a pink shirt. Another young woman is visible in the background. The image is partially obscured by a large red diagonal shape.

**Experiences and  
insights from the U.S.**

# **OFFERING A COURSE ON HAPPINESS**

Part of the project 'Designing a Happier  
Student Life for Better Learning: International  
experiences and capacity building'

**INNOVATION  
CENTRE  
DENMARK**



**Ministry of Higher  
Education and Science  
Denmark**

# DESIGNING A HAPPIER STUDENT LIFE

This case is a part of the project 'Designing a happier student life for better learning,' managed by the Danish Innovation Centres in Silicon Valley and Boston, and the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science.

## About the project

"Designing a happier student life for better learning' is an internationally focused project on how to 'design' a better student life, increase student well-being and thus create optimal conditions for better learning. The project draws on the knowledge and experience of elite US universities working on the well-being agenda and leading experts in the field.

A growing body of evidence shows that student well-being is an essential element of education and overall student success. In a recent national survey of Danish students, 48% reported feeling stressed, and 22-26% felt that they were feeling lonely, which calls for action in both amending bad mental health and strengthening good mental health. Systematically working on improving mental health and building strong and healthy minds has a range of benefits for students personally and their learning, which is why the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science supports this project.

Via Innovation Centre Denmark in Silicon Valley and Innovation Centre Denmark in Boston, the international perspective and inspiration are integrated into the design of such initiatives by involving key US experts in the field and setting up partnerships for the Danish stakeholders

via:

- Capacity-building
- Knowledge-sharing
- Networks and partnerships

The project targets Danish Higher Education institutions, its students and relevant staff involved in student life and well-being, such as student counselors, faculty, and top management. You can read more about the project (in Danish) here: [ufm.dk/designing-a-happier-student-life](https://ufm.dk/designing-a-happier-student-life), where you can also find other cases (in English) and relevant material about the project's activities. If you like to get in touch with the Danish Agency for Higher Education and Science about well-being to discuss the project further, you can mail [trivsel@ufm.dk](mailto:trivsel@ufm.dk).

# OFFERING A COURSE ON HAPPINESS

## TAKE-AWAY POINTS

- Research shows that you can learn skills to make yourself happier
- The top universities in the US are offering courses on how to improve your own happiness
- Happiness courses are extremely popular with the students and they have a proven effect on stress reduction and overall happiness
- US experts emphasize that happiness courses cannot be organized as a one-off class. In order to have an effect, the course needs to be designed in a way that allows for continuous practice

*Can we teach students how to be happier? Evidence from the US suggests so.*

Positive psychology is a growing field in the US. In positive psychology, the focus is less on easing suffering and more on improving general well-being. Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, a psychology professor at the University of California, Riverside has demonstrated how happiness is conscious, intentional, and something that people can pursue. She argues that people can boost their well-being via interventions, positive activities, and intentional behaviors and maintain that boost in the long-term.

**“People can become and stay happier  
when they practice positive activities”**

– Prof. Sonja Lyubomirski, University of California, Riverside

American universities are tapping into this growing body of scientific research on what makes people happy and exploring how they can use this research actively in their education. To this end, an increasing number of top universities are offering specific courses on well-being in order to provide the students with the necessary tools to improve their happiness.

## POPULARITY AND IMPACT

Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and UC Berkeley all offer courses that teach students skills to improve their own well-being, and these “happiness courses” are very popular with the students.

Stanford University first began to teach a course on improving student happiness in 2008. The course was an instant success with the enrolled students reporting a 27% reduction in their stress levels upon course completion. As the professor of the course, Dr. Fred Luskin, states: “the most important thing, however, is perhaps that the students don’t only learn the theory, they feel better and get healthier”. According to Prof. Luskin, this course offering has become increasingly popular over the last few years in a society where social media constantly reminds students of their own unhappiness. At the same time, there is a growing awareness of the need to take care of oneself.

**“The students don’t only learn the theory, they feel better and get healthier”**

– Prof. Fred Luskin, Stanford University

This is not the only happiness course offered at Stanford University. The university’s location in the middle of Silicon Valley has made it a hub for entrepreneurs. Tapping into this innovative mindset, the university is now offering another course that teaches students to apply design thinking to the “wicked problem” of creating fulfilling lives and careers. One in six undergraduates attends this course called “Designing Your Life”.

### ONLINE RESOURCES

Yale University’s online course can be found at [www.coursera.org](http://www.coursera.org)

UC Berkeley’s online course can be found at [www.ggsc.berkeley.edu](http://www.ggsc.berkeley.edu)

UPenn’s positive psychology courses and validated surveys to measure happiness can be found at [www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu](http://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu)

online

At Harvard University, prof. Tal Ben-Shahar’s course on positive psychology was one of the largest courses in the university’s history. Heavily inspired by the Harvard course, Professor at Yale University, Laurie Santos, developed the course “Psychology and the Good Life” in 2018, which turned out to be the most popular course in the university’s 320-year history. More than 1,200 undergraduate students enrolled for the first semester. To increase the accessibility of the course, Yale has also launched a free online version of the course named “The Science of Well-Being.” With the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, more than 3.4 million people enrolled in the course online.

## Yale's happiness course "Psychology and the Good Life" is the most popular course in the university's 320-year history

UC Berkeley is also offering an all-online happiness course: "The Science of Happiness Course" where students discover how cutting-edge research can be applied to their own lives. More than 550,000 students have registered for it so far. One might question if taking an online course about the science of happiness can actually make you happier. According to UC Berkeley it can. During the course, students' subjective happiness and life satisfaction increased by about 5% and this boost remained even four months after the course was completed.



### WHAT DO YOU LEARN IN A HAPPINESS COURSE?

The aforementioned courses offer insights into the newest psychological insights and practical application. In short, these courses assist the students in figuring out what a happy life looks like and teaches them scientifically-tested strategies to achieve that goal. Prof. Fred Luskin explains that gratitude and compassion have been designated some of the gateway skills of happiness, yet our brain is hardwired to focus on the negative instead of the positive. However, performing specific gratitude and optimism exercises have been shown to boost happiness by making people perceive their life events more positively.

**"We have a brain that is used to focusing on what is wrong – the goal is to reprogram it to see the positive"**

– Prof. Fred Luskin, Stanford University

The courses present the students with the theory of positive psychology as well as exercises to help rewire the brain and facilitate behavior change. In this way, students not only learn the theory but they also have to apply it in practice with exercises such as gratitude journaling, reaction essays, meditation, and reflection breaks.

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The purpose of the course is to not only learn what psychological research says about what makes us happy but also to put those strategies into practice

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Psychology and the Good Life  
Course Description,  
Yale University

Prof. Laurie Santos teaches Yale's celebrated happiness course. Reflecting on the success of the course, Santos adds that many people mistakenly believe that they need to change their entire life to be happier, yet simple acts like making a new acquaintance or taking time to be in the present moment play a much bigger part.

While the teachings of the class are mostly based on the actual science of happiness, homework practices are more untraditional. Students are asked to sleep more, meditate, and perform random acts of kindness in their spare time. For this reason, students jokingly refer to the course as the "hardest class at Yale".

An almost exact copy of the class was taught in Bristol in the United Kingdom. Here, they found that the class helped prevent the overall drop in well-being that typically happens to students later on in the semester. The class is still relatively new, so it is difficult to determine if the students' boost in well-being comes from learning the material taught in the class or is due to alternative practices and assignments. In any case, many students have self-reported that the class helped them and some even stated that taking the class has been life-changing.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS TO DANISH STAKEHOLDERS**

There are differences between the Danish and American educational system that need to be considered if designing a similar course offer in a Danish context. Danish universities offer more specialized undergraduate programmes, whereas American undergraduate students generally have the option of following courses from different disciplines and institutes. Nonetheless, one can imagine various institutional set-ups: educational institutions can offer the course as a voluntary non-credit course, some faculties might consider offering it as a credit-giving course for their students etc.

Speaking with Innovation Centre Denmark, prof. Fred Luskin stressed the importance of designing the course in a way that makes it more than a single two-hour class: "make it a sequence, something that they have to keep up with all throughout college". Prof. Luskin pointed out that there are various ways of organizing such a course: it can be designed as a proper course running an entire semester; it can be a seminar the beginning of every quarter, or just a weekly happiness break and exercise. Happiness skills are not constant but have to be practiced continuously in order to have a lasting effect. A course offering could be more effective if reflecting this fact.