

# CENTRIC

THE UCF STUDENT MAGAZINE



*What  
is our  
Legacy?*

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# Can Happiness be Taught?

*It all starts from within.*

BY DANIELA VIVAS LABRADOR

UCF professor Elizabeth Grauerholz created the curriculum for her Sociology of Happiness course as a call from her own life journey.

"I was at this point of my life and started thinking about the meaning of life, what it means to be happy — to live a fulfilled life," Grauerholz said. "And I got to thinking, 'This is what young people need to know; they need to be asking these questions.'"

Sociology of Happiness, which she has been teaching for the past year, refers to the study of how culture shapes people's happiness, an angle not often taken within the sociology field, Grauerholz said.

"The typical focus in sociology is more on social problems ... the happiness study is sort of like 'Let's look at the other side,'" she said. "What is it that makes a community happy? A group? An individual? How can we shape our culture, our economy, our families and our educational system to contribute to that well-being?"

## **The Struggle: To Be Happy or Content?**

Measuring happiness has been shown to not be anywhere close to how easy it is to measure social issues' impact on people. There is not a certain way to identify whether a college campus is happier than another, not even by how many students seek to improve their own mental health, Grauerholz said.

"Happiness is hard, and I think we could almost do a disservice by even suggesting that everyone should be happy," Jocelyn Buhain, associate director of Clinical Services at UCF Counseling and Psychological Services, said. "I think it could almost set an unreasonable expectation because there are so many factors that go into people's lives, and while happiness is great, that may be a challenge."

According to Buhain, there has been an evident upward trend in the total number of students interested and willing to seek

counseling, which is a positive trend to see. Yet, this is not an indicator of happiness on campus.

"[It] is complicated as a construct," Buhain said. "While happiness is a nice ideal, even the idea of being content could be more realistic as content would be more of a state of being. Happiness is like an emotion that can come and go, so I don't know if there is a direct correlation between our trends of numbers and our students' happiness; I think that may be a stretch," she said.

But there are more UCF professors and members of the UCF community trying to inspire this happiness journey in others.

Theatre senior lecturer Sybil St. Claire has been teaching at UCF for 19 years, but this is the first semester she is teaching Thrive: The How of Happiness online course, which was inspired by her own search for happiness.

"Turns out I have an autoimmune disease that has been quite nasty," she said. "I was having a lot of trouble feeling good about things when I felt so bad. I was curious about how I could take charge of my attitude and my life when I have this very



oppressive thing that is changing my life and not for the better.”

After years of experience, she developed a three-prompt philosophy for how she teaches: “education should be fun, play is a form of research and we learn best at what we do.” She uses that philosophy as her guide while she looks at empirical scientific research through an art-space lens and creates an experiential exploration of happiness through in-class workshops and self-reflection activities.

“The way that I [teach] builds community, creates friends, combines science and art,” St. Claire said. “It helps us think about our thinking, prevents hedonic adaptation, which is this idea of taking things and people for granted, and promotes mindfulness which is this idea of being here now. Ultimately, the journey is [the student’s]. I’m just a facilitator of experiences.”

### **It’s Never Too Early**

This change is not only being ignited at the college level, but also at the elementary school level. Joyce Nichols, a first grade teacher in Orlando and UCF alumna, shared how she incorporates mindfulness to enhance kids’ emotional and social development.

The switch in her approach started back in the ‘90s when she started experimenting with disciplines such as tai chi and yoga.

“I realized how movement in my body calmed me down and realized that movement in kids’ bodies could do the same,” she said.

Now, she allows her students to freely experiment with any emotion they might be going through during the day, but she also teaches them to navigate through it in a safe, mindful way.

Whether that means doing a breathing exercise or sitting down on the “tantrum towel” and laying on the floor in the classroom space designated for these situations, Nichols ensures her students completely explore their emotions.

“The whole goal is for them not to need me coaching them through it,” Nichols said. “They need to be aware of that stuff on their own.”

### **Happiness in Action**

UCF graduate student John Weston said he took Grauerholz’s Sociology of Happiness class spring 2021 and felt he was getting

happier as the semester progressed.

“I had never had that addition of also improving as a person in the class,” Weston said. “The biggest takeaway from it was how important relationships are and spending time with people, so whether you’re doing that online or joining clubs or just going out of your way to make friends and connect with people, it ultimately all came down to forming relationships.”



**One could say that the only time you can be happy is right now. There is this idea of this immediacy of it too, it’s not something in the future, it’s not something in the past, it’s something that is right now.**

*Sybil St. Claire, senior lecturer of theatre at UCF School of Performing Arts*



Regardless, Buhain said therapy could be helpful. It’s just not an easy, happiness- guaranteed process.

“Sometimes, people go to therapy, and it changes them; they end up making big life changes,” Buhain said. “Sometimes, it’s not immediately happiness. It could be like ‘I’m not in a healthy relationship; I’m going to have to break up,’ and the person is sad. Eventually, when they get through the sadness or loss, then they can find happiness or peace.”

Buhain said the fact that professors and the UCF community are now paying attention to these topics will have a positive effect on students in the long run.

“It’s fantastic that UCF offers those types of courses to our students,” she said. “Any course that talks about mental health is a great course. Oftentimes mental health is either a taboo topic culturally speaking or one that gets ignored, so any course that offers students the opportunity to learn, reflect, develop and grow is a valuable course.”