

***OurStory: Leveraging College Admission Essays to Reframe Beliefs and Shape Positive
Personal Narratives in African American Adolescents***

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Abstract

The stories we tell can shape our lives and our experiences. Unfortunately, many African American adolescents are often subjected to stereotypes and one-sided deficit narratives that can become self-fulfilling prophecies undermining their achievement, aspirations, and well-being. However, the college admission process offers an intervention opportunity to help these students tell a different story—their story. In this paper, the author presents an analysis of the threats and opportunities inherent in the college-admission process and a literature review on topics aligned to three pillars—beliefs, belonging, and becoming. The paper concludes with the application plan for an intervention that leverages the college admission essay and essay-writing process to reframe beliefs and shape positive personal narratives. Inspired by research from narrative psychology, social psychology, and positive psychology, *OurStory* challenges dominant deficit narratives and aims to improve academic outcomes, college matriculation rates, and adolescent flourishing and well-being.

Keywords: adolescent well-being, African American youth, college admission essay, critical counternarrative, growth mindset intervention, personal narrative, positive psychology intervention, positive youth development, social belonging, storytelling, wise interventions

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When I was 10, my fifth-grade teacher told me I was a B student, and I shouldn't expect more of myself. She told my parents the same thing. In short, they told her to go pound sand.

For the last life-changing year, I have been a student in the 17th class of the Master of Applied Positive Psychology (MAPP) program at the University of Pennsylvania. Soon, I will be counted among Penn's distinguished alumni. On day one, I, along with my classmates, was assured that I was needed and that I belonged. I was encouraged to look for the good, to lean on others, and to believe that I can. And I have. I've seen myself do things I never knew I was capable of. I've weathered the worst of storms. I've forged meaningful friendships that I suspect will last a lifetime. And each day, I'm becoming a better version of myself.

This capstone is the culmination of an incredible year in my story. It is my belief in and expectation for so much more. This capstone is the fruit of seeds so many have planted, nurtured, and harvested along the way. It has been a joy to write, and I'm eager to share it with you.

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OurStory: Leveraging College Admission Essays to Reframe Beliefs and Shape Positive Personal Narratives in African American Adolescents

African Americans are resilient and strong. We are a dynamic and diverse people rich with cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and multiple strengths (e.g., Hurd, 1995; Littlejohn-Blake & Darlin, 1993; Mattis et al., 2003). But this may not be the tale you've been told.

More likely you've heard stories of poverty, violence, disadvantage, and lack (Mattis et al., 2016; Yosso, 2005). When you hear terms like "achievement gap" or "school-to-prison pipeline," our children and youth may be the first faces you picture. You may have heard labels like "at risk" to describe these young people rather than factors or life circumstances (DeFreitas, 2020). In higher education, you may regard our scholars as exceptions rather than as the rule. And if you follow mainstream media, the few stories of African Americans thriving and doing well will be limited to other outliers—the athletes and celebrities among us. In television and film, you'll likely see one-dimensional stereotypes and caricatures meant to represent us despite our multidimensionality, character, and complexity. And on the evening news, you may catch the relentless negative stories, messages, and images diminishing our value and self-worth—the costs of which include self-doubt, limiting beliefs, and internalized racism (Jones, 2000).

Regretfully, flourishing is not a word commonly used to describe African Americans or our story—even in helping professions like education or psychology. Despite our value and strengths, African Americans have been historically underrepresented and even pathologized in scholarly research (Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017; Rao & Donaldson, 2015). The limited and pertinent data and inquiries about us often emphasize negative life outcomes, suffering, and risk (DeFreitas, 2020; Delgado, 1989; Mattis et al., 2016; Yosso, 2005)—perpetuating these deficiency narratives.

But again, African Americans are resilient and strong.

The stories of love that our mothers and grandmothers tell are not these stories. The stories of belonging that our families and communities share with one another are not these stories. The stories of hope preached from the pulpits of our churches are not these stories. The stories of redemption of our poets and preachers, scholars and teachers are not these stories. And although chapters of our story have been smeared with blood, sweat, and tears of injustice, we are far more than the worst things that have happened to us. Generation after generation of our individual and collective stories will tell you that indeed, African Americans are resilient and strong.

Our Stories

Since our earliest days as *Homo sapiens*, humans have been telling and sharing stories (Bayer & Hettinger 2019). Through storytelling, we convey emotions, connect with others, and make sense of our lives and our experiences (Bayer & Hettinger, 2019; Bruner, 1990; McAdams, 1995). Narratives scholar Angus Fletcher (2021) postulates that narratives were one of our first great powers.

Storytelling is a staple in African American culture (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Through drawing (e.g., Azéma & Rivère, 2012), song, spoken and written word (Delgado, 1989), our stories have connected us to ourselves, to others, and to one another for generations. These narratives have given meaning to our struggles, sustained our survival, shaped our identities, and illuminated our humanity (Delgado, 1989; Tomasulo & Pawelski, 2012).

Personal narratives—that is, the coherent life stories comprised of a beginning and end that connect the events of our lives—have the power to shape our identities, experiences, and our narrative trajectory (Jones et al., 2018; McAdams, 2001). How we construct and make meaning

of these stories can affect not only our relationships, work, self-perception, motivation, achievement, and life outcomes, it can also affect how we respond to the events in our lives (Jones et al., 2018). Further, how we connect ourselves to these events can affect our sense of self, mental health, and well-being (Adler 2012; Bauer et al., 2008; Pasupathi et al., 2007).

Our *narrative identities*—that is, these internalized life stories—evolve throughout our lifespan; but they begin and take root during adolescence (McAdams, 1985, 2011). In adolescence, we begin to notice connections between our *selves* in different contexts at different times. We begin to string these disparate observations of self into a cohesive story (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Expert on adolescent development, Laurence Steinberg (2014), refers to adolescence as an “age of opportunity” due to the heightened neuroplasticity and cognitive development that take place during this time of life (Steinberg, 2005). For the first time in our lives, we can think abstractly and hold multiple ideas in mind at once. We can make causal connections between ourselves and our experiences (McLean, 2008; Steinberg, 2005). And importantly, through the constructing and sharing of our stories—processes by which our identities emerge—we can make meaning of these experiences, both individually and collectively (McLean et al., 2007; McLean, 2008).

Research suggests that personal, collective, and historical-group narratives can predict adolescents’ academic outcomes (Bikmen, 2015). Depending on how we frame them, the stories we tell—and believe—can affect motivation, behavior, competence, perceptions, and how we respond to the inevitable challenges of school, work, relationships, and life (Jones et al., 2018). Depending on how they’re told, adolescent narratives can promote persistence and academic achievement (Jones et al., 2018). Patterns in the stories we tell about our lives often reflect and correspond to our well-being (Bauer et al., 2008). And for better or worse, during these

formative years of our lives, we may integrate societal, cultural, and collective narratives into the crafting and shaping of our personal ones. So, for the last year, I've been wondering, what might happen if we strategically—considerately—intervened?

OurStory: A Positive Intervention Opportunity

In the United States, millions of students apply to college each year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021a). And for most, this process demands that they craft an essay or personal statement. These essays often require students to consider who they are and who they hope to become. For many, this may be the first time they use their own words to reflect on their values and strengths. It may be the first time they reflect on their life challenges and their beliefs. And it may be the first time they imagine how they will contribute to society and the world. The college admission essay is a personal narrative that millions of students are writing every year (e.g., Freeman et al., 2021), and I believe it presents an invaluable and untapped intervention opportunity.

In this paper, I will present the situation and research case supporting this belief. I'll offer perspectives on the threats and opportunities—specifically to African American youth—inherent in the college admission essay and application process. Then, I'd like to escort you through an extensive literature review of theory, research, and practices from narrative, social, and positive psychology, each of which have informed and inspired the intervention plan I'll present in the final section of the paper. This intervention, *OurStory*, has the potential not only to positively affect college matriculation and academic outcomes for African American adolescents, but it also has the potential to reinforce the resilience and strength at the heart of the African American story. I believe *OurStory* can nurture a more positive collective narrative, promote positive

personal narratives, and increase our students' well-being. So, to begin, let's situate ourselves in the science of well-being.

Positive Psychology | The Science of Well-Being

Positive psychology is the scientific study of the qualities, traits, and conditions that foster both individual and communal well-being (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Sheldon et al., 2000). It is distinct in its focus on subjective experiences, strengths, and the use of scientific rigor to investigate and promote the positive and worthwhile (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Since its inception, the field has been discontented to fix solely what is wrong, but rather, intent to foster what is right (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

In his seminal work, *Motivation and Personality*, humanistic psychologist Abraham Maslow (1954) may have been the first to use the term “positive psychology,” which he included in the title of the book's final chapter. Nearly 70 years ago, Maslow noted that the field of psychology knew more about humanity's shortcomings than its heights—emphasizing just half of a whole. As such, he proposed the exploration of positive psychological concepts, including love, kindness, optimism, and human potential (Maslow, 1954).

Forty-five years later, in his presidential address to the American Psychological Association, psychology researcher and scholar, Martin Seligman (1999) picked up on this thread. He suggested that in its hyperfocus since World War II on pathology and mental illness, psychology had unwittingly limited its scope and departed from its early intention to make people's lives better. He observed that the field was well-versed in equipping people to weather adversity, but ill-equipped to help everyday people thrive in everyday life. Accordingly, Seligman concluded his address with a call to action to the field's researchers and practitioners—to become students and scholars of the good life. He charged them to shift their perspectives on

mental illness to include mental health; to reorient their focus from weaknesses to strengths; to explore how to foster these traits in youth; and to adopt a mission rooted in science to help people cultivate the qualities and conditions that make life worth living (Seligman, 1999).

Strengths and Interventions: The Legacies of Positive Psychology

Positive psychology was conceptualized as a complement to existing and mainstream branches of psychology, which for over 20 years, it has been. Arguably, two of its most important contributions to the field include a formalized classification of character strengths and virtues—that is, a common language to describe what’s best in us (Peterson & Seligman, 2004)—and positive psychology interventions (PPIs), which are intentional activities purposed to increase well-being (Lyubomirsky, 2001).

Table 1

VIA Classification of Character Strengths and Virtues

| | | Virtues | | | | | |
|---------------------|--------------|---------|---------------------|------------|-----------------|-----------------------------------|------------------|
| | | Courage | Humanity | Justice | Temperance | Transcendence | Wisdom |
| Character Strengths | | Bravery | Kindness | Fairness | Forgiveness | Appreciation of beauty/excellence | Creativity |
| | | Honesty | Love | Leadership | Humility | Gratitude | Curiosity |
| | Perseverance | | Social intelligence | Teamwork | Prudence | Hope | Judgment |
| | Zest | | | | Self-regulation | Humor | Love of learning |
| | | | | | | Spirituality | Perspective |

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Our 24 character strengths, the positive aspects of our personalities (Niemiec, 2018) shown in Table 1, are pathways to and through which we express the six core virtues—courage, humanity, justice, temperance, transcendence, and wisdom—valued by thinkers, leaders, and

saints throughout history (Park & Peterson, 2009; Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Research shows that using our strengths can positively impact our relationships, performance, engagement, emotions, and more (Park et al., 2004). It can make our lives more meaningful, satisfying (Park et al., 2004), and foster well-being (Niemi, 2018).

In an exploration of well-being literature, positive psychology scholars found that our genetics and life circumstances contribute only partially to our happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Through intentional activities such as PPIs, they determined, we have within our control, the ability to sustain and/or augment our levels of happiness (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005). Some of the earliest, most researched, and longest enduring PPIs include counting our blessings, writing letters of gratitude, and using our character strengths in a new way (Seligman et al., 2005; Lyubomirsky & Layous, 2013). Subsequent meta-analyses have shown that these PPIs can increase happiness (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009) and well-being (e.g., Boaler et al., 2013; Carr et al., 2021).

Noting that the field has been slow to grow past these early research-validated interventions, positive psychology scholar James Pawelski (2020) recently proposed a methodological approach that distills PPIs into their core components. These elements include *activity*, an intentional action; *active ingredient*, the factor that leads to change; *the targeted change*; *the target system*, which refers to the domain in which a change occurs; and finally, the *desired outcome*. With this elements model, researchers and practitioners can clarify which elements work best together to promote change across contexts. Additionally, they can analyze and synthesize more interventions to continue to move the field forward (Pawelski, 2020).

Broadening Perspectives on Well-Being

Since Seligman formalized its emergence, the field of positive psychology has evolved and expanded to include more perspectives and a variety of applications, in the humanities and education, for example. Although the exploration and pursuit of human flourishing and well-being has remained a focal point, its substance, scope, and specifics have been ongoing topics of development, discussion, and debate. Some scholars posit that well-being is that which we choose for its own sake when our basic biological needs—including food, water, shelter, safety, and attachment—are met (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Seligman, 2011). Over a decade after his presidential address, Seligman (2011) proposed that free people choose PERMA—positive emotions, engagement, positive relationships, meaning, and accomplishment—as a desired end.

Others underscore the dialectical nature of flourishing and well-being, citing the tension, coexistence, and interdependence of the light and dark aspects of life (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016). The “positive” in positive psychology isn't a straightforward definition, note still more scholars (e.g., McNulty & Fincham, 2012), because even the best of lives hold both “positive” and “negative” aspects (Pawelski, 2016). Accordingly, a comprehensive positive psychology and science of human flourishing requires more nuanced, complex, and multidimensional perspectives than the ideas that characterized its origins (Lomas & Ivtzan, 2016; Lomas et al., 2020).

Still others underscore the critical role of culture, values, and beliefs in discourse regarding human flourishing (Constantine and Sue 2006). One's culture can be a primary influencer in the shaping, development, and cultivation of character, virtues, and strengths (Lopez et al., 2006). As such, many scholars assert cultural context is inextricable from well-

being and optimal human functioning (e.g., Constantine & Sue, 2006; Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017).

Over the years, responses to positive psychology have not all been positive. Some have criticized the field for the persons, perspectives, and stories it has omitted, marginalized, or misrepresented, African Americans included. Some contend that the field has discounted the importance not only of cultural context but also of interpersonal context in the creation and optimal implementation of positive interventions (McNulty & Fincham, 2012). Some assert that the field has overlooked the intersectional challenges that many face (Kern et al., 2020). And early critics underscored its ethnocentrism, basis on Western culture and values, research samples comprised primarily of White Americans, and interventions targeting wealthy individuals, communities, and countries (Constantine & Sue, 2006; Gillham et al., 2019; Jeglic et al., 2016; Rao & Donaldson, 2015).

In my own experience, I've observed hurdles and limitations in accessing positive psychology research. Fortified behind paywalls and expensive degrees, abstruse journal articles summarizing and discussing the implications of research findings appear to be exchanged primarily between academics. After a year as a student in the field, I've labored through numerous journal articles written in heady language that everyday people may not understand. In many cases, those outside of academia must primarily access research through the interpretations of others. And regrettably, in my research for this paper, I too have observed that many researchers have told only one side of a multidimensional story, reinforcing stereotypes and negative biases.

Additionally, a systematic review and content analysis of peer-reviewed positive psychology literature spanning 1998–2014 revealed among other things, a lack of attention to

diversity or issues pertaining to African Americans and other people of color (Rao & Donaldson, 2015). As Jacqueline Mattis and colleagues (2016) aptly observed, “the field has not imagined African Americans as people who experience joys, desires, passion, and growth or who make love or compassionate sacrifices for others” (p. 85).

However, more scholars in the field are calling for an increasingly accurate, culturally competent, inclusive, and accessible positive psychology (Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017). And as the field continues to evolve, priorities and perspectives are changing. More positive psychology researchers and practitioners are adopting a systems approach; considering the importance of social, historical, and cultural context in their work; shifting their vantage points to include more non-Western cultures; and recognizing how in doing so, perceptions of well-being may look differently for different people (Lomas et al., 2020). Scholars are recognizing the need for greater inclusion of underrepresented groups—not only as subjects of inquiry, but also as practitioners and researchers (Rao & Donaldson, 2015). In addition to writing popular press books, posting to social media, or creating informative websites for mainstream audiences, more scholars are adopting a model of open access, leveraging digital technology to make research literature publicly available online (Yiotis, 2005). And renowned academic programs, such as the Master of Applied Positive Psychology program at the University of Pennsylvania, have created massive open online courses (MOOCs) through platforms like Coursera to make this work more accessible to more people (College of Liberal and Professional Studies, n.d.).

In its focus on what is right with us, rather than fixation on what is not, positive psychology is uniquely poised to right wrongs and reframe perspectives. Building on the strengths of the past and leveraging present-day insights, researchers, scholars, and practitioners are expanding the applications of positive psychology and reconsidering the construction and

scope of positive interventions (Pawelski, 2020). As the world and the field continue to evolve, so too can the stories we live, tell, and choose to believe.

Part I—Situation Analysis | Obstacles and Opportunities on Pathways to College

I believe the case for higher education is compelling and strong. Post-secondary schooling has the power to both elevate and liberate. It can promote personal, professional, relational, and societal benefits, including higher incomes and lower unemployment rates (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022); increased productivity and civic engagement (Ma et al., 2019); longer life (Hummer & Hernandez, 2013), better health and well-being, as well as downstream posterity benefits (Ma et al., 2019). In June 2022, the average weekly earnings of a full-time worker with a college degree were 65% higher than those of a worker with a high school diploma (U. S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022). Further, college-degree earners are less likely to smoke, to be obese, or to receive a depression diagnosis (Rosenbaum, 2012). And in the United States, the remaining life expectancy of 25-year old adults with a college degree has been reported as many as 10 years longer than adults who have not completed high school (Hummer & Hernandez, 2013).

Despite the benefits of higher education, college enrollment numbers have been in a slow and steady decline since 2010 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b). Nevertheless, millions of students remain on multiple pathways toward college. In 2020, roughly 63% of the 3.1 million students who graduated from high school or completed an equivalent credential transitioned immediately from high school to college (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). And for many, the college admission application was the gateway between the two. For example, in 2020, over 1.5 million first-year students submitted over 6.6 million college applications by way of the Common Application, a non-profit portal that enables students to

complete one application and submit it to multiple colleges and universities (Freeman et al., 2021).

The College Admission and Application Process

In the U.S., college admission applications are often comprised of a student-information section, where students provide summary and sociodemographic information about themselves, including personal and family history, grade point average (GPA), standardized test scores, extracurricular activities, work experience, awards, and honors. Students must also provide teacher evaluations or recommendations, and their school counselors must furnish school-summary information and a student evaluation. In addition to paying an application fee or applying for a fee waiver, students often respond to short-answer questions. Lastly, they must select from a list of prompts to write at least one college admission essay (Common App, n.d.). In theory, this comprehensive and straightforward application gives admission committees a sense not only of what applicants do, how they think, and how they write, but also of who they are and who they hope to become. In theory, it enables students to pitch themselves to colleges and universities and to begin their pursuit of the opportunities that a college degree affords.

However, the college admission and application process does not necessarily afford equal opportunities. In the past, some researchers posited that curriculum-based standard assessments reinforce academic rigor, promote content alignment across schools, and are the fairest and most effective college admission assessments (Atkinson & Geiser, 2009). But as more research findings have become available, some of the same researchers have subsequently concluded otherwise (e.g., Geiser, 2017).

Researchers and sociologists have asserted that in both their structure and substance, standardized exams such as the SAT tend to favor the privileged (Reeves & Halikias, 2017).

Further, test scores positively correlate with both income status and race (Geiser & Santelices, 2007; Rosinger et al., 2021). And studies have shown that for some students, inquiries regarding their race and/or ethnicity prior to a standardized exam, for example, may compromise performance (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Lastly, in a small, qualitative study ($N = 227$) examining urban African-American and Latino high school students' perceptions of the SAT, students regarded the exam as an unfair obstacle, citing a lack of test-taking information, reliance on uninformed school officials, and stress regarding scoring expectations (Walpole et al., 2005).

Through their high schools, many students may have access to college counseling centers or guidance counseling personnel, but college-preparatory resources are hardly equitable either (Grodsky et al., 2008). Many students lack the access and advantages that can come with a college-preparatory and/or advanced-placement curriculum (Iatarola et al., 2011), standardized exam preparation courses, private tutors and counselors, socioeconomic security, and/or ethnic-majority status. Students of low socioeconomic status tend to work more, study less, have lower grades, and participate in fewer extracurricular activities than students of high economic status (Walpole, 2003; 2008). And selective colleges and universities enroll disproportionate numbers of White students of high socioeconomic status (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021b; 2022).

In efforts to abate these inequities, many admission committees have adopted more holistic selection criteria (e.g., evaluations of interviews, essays, extracurriculars, and academic rigor; Rosinger et al., 2021). However, the ambiguity and implicit expectations of these criteria may exacerbate disparity in college admissions (Rosinger et al., 2021; Warren 2013). Some students have minimal support at home and/or uncertainty about how to navigate the college selection, financing, application, and essay-writing processes (University of Washington &

Washington State University, 2013). Such inequities not only limit post-graduation options, but on a deeper level, they may diminish one's belief in their ability to change their circumstances (Coleman et al., 1966); undermine one's sense of belonging (Walton & Cohen, 2007); and reinforce biases, stereotypes, and internalized narratives of insufficiency (Jones, 2000)—not only for the students that lack resources, support, and status, but also for the students, teachers, and admissions officers who have them (University of Washington & Washington State University, 2013).

Threats to Higher Education

As enrollment and achievement gaps widen, debilitating narratives and pervasive stereotypes persist. *Stereotype threat*, which essentially positions stereotypes as self-fulfilling prophecies, is particularly destructive because it puts kids at risk of confirming them (Steele & Aronson, 1995). Negative stereotypes about students' intellect in performance conditions not only undermine standardized test scores (Danaher & Crandall, 2008; Steele, 1997) and admissions outcomes (Logel et al., 2012), but they can also adversely affect academic performance and aspiration (Spencer et al., 2016), increase stress, compromise well-being, and provoke self-destructive behavior (Sherman et al., 2000). Stereotype threat activates a cascade of negative automatic thoughts (Steele & Aronson, 1995), underestimation of one's own abilities (Walton & Spencer, 2009), and subsequent underperformance (Walton & Spencer, 2009)—especially in those who strongly identify with a stigmatized or stereotyped group (Spencer et al., 2016).

Two meta-analyses—the first in laboratory conditions ($N = 3,180$) and the second in composite field experiments ($N = 15,796$)—investigated the effects of stereotype threat on performance. Under stereotype-threatening conditions, stereotyped African American students

initially performed worse than non-stereotyped students of comparable past performance. However, they performed significantly better than non-stereotyped students of comparable past performance in conditions where the stereotype threat was reduced or removed (Walton & Spencer, 2009). These *latent abilities* suggest that commonly used and oftentimes stereotype-threatening evaluations such as standardized exams may not only undermine stigmatized students' performance, but they may also underestimate their abilities (Logel et al., 2012).

In 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic illuminated systemic racial disparities in the United States and brought them to the forefront. When compared with White Americans, for example, Black Americans were nearly twice as likely to die from Covid-19 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Lower income, Black, and Hispanic students were less likely to learn remotely in optimal conditions (e.g., high-speed internet, a dedicated device, and parental support and supervision) or to log into remote-learning school environments consistently (Dorn et al., 2020). And learning losses that occurred as a result of such conditions were projected to impact low-income students of color the most (Dorn et al., 2020).

In the world of college admissions, as standardized-exam dates were delayed and/or canceled due to lock downs, hundreds of colleges and universities suspended their SAT and/or ACT requirements (Brooks, 2020; Freeman et al., 2021; Nadworny, 2020; Orbey, 2022; Strauss, 2020). As the world has been opening back up again, in addition to acknowledging the inherent inequities that may accompany such requirements, more colleges and universities are noting compelling research findings that support abandoning them (Geiser, 2017).

Of note, although both test scores and high school GPA can predict college success, GPA is a stronger predictor of academic achievement and graduation rates (Allensworth & Clark, 2020; Geiser & Santelices, 2007; Stumpf & Stanley, 2002). Additionally, multi-year and/or

intensive participation in extracurricular activity is linked with positive academic and civic outcomes, both short- and long-term (Gardner et al., 2008). And several researchers underscore the importance not only of traditional academic measures, but also of noncognitive factors (e.g., mindset, grit, motivation, self-discipline, and social belonging) in promoting positive college outcomes (Duckworth & Yeager, 2015). As such, more colleges are weighting GPA, recommendations, student activities, and college essays more heavily (Brooks, 2020; Furuta, 2017). Of course this practice can still be advantageous to some kids while disadvantageous to others. However, test-blind and test-optional college admissions may also present a timely intervention opportunity.

The Admission Essay Opportunity

Historically, admission committees have used the college admission essay and application to predict which applicants will fit well and add the most value to their student bodies and school communities. These essays and applications have also been an insightful tool for predictive research. For example, in one study leveraging machine learning, data analytics, and a longitudinal dataset of 41,358 college admission applications, researchers predicted graduation rates for 70% of the sample of prospective students based solely on the information they provided in their applications (Hutt et al., 2018). Another longitudinal study analyzed the text of more than 50,000 admission essays written by more than 25,000 incoming college students. In this study, Pennebaker and colleagues (2014) discovered that how we write and the words—specifically the short words—we use may be able to predict the sorts of grades we will achieve, or at least predict the cognitive and writing styles often validated in higher education. The researchers tracked participants' grades for the duration of their college tenure. Text analyses revealed that students with higher grades used more articles (e.g., a, an, the) and prepositions

(e.g., along, beside) in their essays. Students with lower grades tended to use more auxiliary verbs (e.g., am, is, are), pronouns (e.g., I, me, us), adverbs (e.g., especially, quickly, slowly), conjunctions (e.g., although, because, unless), and negations (e.g. no, not, never; Pennebaker et al., 2014).

To date, the college admission essay has been a beneficial tool to admission committees, scholars, and researchers alike. But I believe it can be a beneficial tool for students—particularly marginalized and negatively stereotyped students—as well.

Here are a few essay-prompt excerpts from the 2021–2022 Common App:

Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure... What did you learn from this experience? Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea... What was the outcome? Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others...

Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time (Common App, n.d.).

Students may not realize it as they're sludging through college applications or scrambling to meet deadlines, but in just four questions, the Common Application has explored positive psychological concepts including resilience, beliefs, accomplishment, growth, and flow—concepts that promote flourishing and well-being (Seligman, 2011). Admission essays may be the first time these students have ever considered how such concepts have affected or will affect their life outcomes. Writing a college admission essay may be a student's first attempt to distill their personal narrative. It may present their first opportunity to tell their own story.

As I've detailed above, there are many hurdles and conditions that could and have compromised well-being and littered pathways to higher education for marginalized and

stereotyped students, including many African American youth. But research suggests that one effective strategy to combat stereotype threat and to promote positive long-term outcomes is to reflect on one's identity and important personal values (Cohen et al., 2006; Cohen et al., 2009), tasks students must complete in order to write an admission essay. Additionally, when a sample of seniors at a low-performing urban high school received explicit instructions regarding the implicit expectations of admissions committees, the essays of students in the experimental group scored significantly higher than those of students in the control group (Warren, 2013).

Importantly, the college admission essay is a narrative tool millions of students are already using each year during a time of critical life transition. Yes, it has been used and can continue to be used to predict academic outcomes. And yet, I wonder how much more valuable this ubiquitous tool could be if we reimagined it as a means by which to improve academic, matriculation, and well-being outcomes.

Leveraging the college admission essay as a narrative tool, I've conceptualized an intervention program targeting African American and other marginalized high school juniors and seniors. I hope this program, *OurStory*, will help all of us move beyond identifying and reinforcing the problems outlined above to the critical work of transforming them. Before we get into the details of this program, we'll turn next to the research and literature that inspired it.

Part II—Literature Review | Building a Program Grounded in Research

As you've likely experienced, and I've intimated thus far, there are multiple ways to tell the same story. The stories we tell can shape both culture and reality (Jones et al., 2018; Delgado, 1989; McAdams, 2001). Some scholars assert that *master narratives*, stories that amplify majority voices and either silence or distort minority ones, are one-sided tales oftentimes rooted in racism (Montecinos, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These stories, which may

include seemingly objective research, reinforce harmful deficit narratives and perpetuate racialized perceptions of people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). But stories can also be used to promote social justice, strengthen traditions, challenge threats to well-being, and amplify the voices we don't often hear from (Miller et al., 2020; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Critical Counternarratives

Counternarratives dispute deficit-based models with a model of strength. Also referred to as *counterstories*, critical counternarratives challenge dominant narratives and widespread beliefs, ascribing value to the epistemologies of people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The concept is based in critical race theory (CRT), which originated as a movement to acknowledge the role of racism in American law (Delgado, 1989; Matsuda, 1991). CRT has since evolved to a cross-disciplinary framework that explores the impact of race and racism in the fabric of society (Yosso, 2005) and a methodology that fosters research, practices, and applications rooted in the stories and experiences of people of color (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). This framework would suggest that in any discourse regarding academic achievement, college admissions, personal, collective, and societal narratives, and/or African American well-being, we must also critically consider both the implicit and explicit influences of race (Yosso, 2005).

Counternarratives amplify the voices of marginalized communities (Miller et al., 2020), benefitting both the storyteller and the listener (Delgado, 1989). They can highlight strengths, build community, challenge and transform belief systems, illuminate new possibilities, and promote a richer reality (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). In the words of Richard Delgado (1989), the legal scholar who introduced the concept, “they can open new windows into reality, showing us that there are possibilities for life other than the ones we live” (p. 2414).

From this perspective, persons and communities of color are not regarded through a lens of disadvantage, poverty, achievement gaps, and lack. Rather, the focus shifts to our multitude of strengths and cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005). Our greatest strengths and primary sources of meaning are core positive psychology concepts, including family and kinship (Constantine & Sue, 2006; Schwartz et al., 2010), faith and spirituality, and our individual and collective resilience (DeFreitas, 2020). Researcher and scholar, Tara Yosso (2005) posits that people of color nurture at least six distinct types of cultural capital—aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant capital. We can hope for the future, and communicate cross-culturally not only through words but also by way of music, arts, and poetry. Our concept of family extends far and wide to include a community of kin (Schwartz et al., 2010). We care for one another, "lifting as we climb," navigating an assortment of social structures. We confront inequality, and we are cultivating resources to make things better (Yosso, 2005, p. 80).

But to affect change, we must evolve from theory to practice; we must progress from storytelling to action (Miller et al., 2020). In their practical model of transformational critical counternarratives, Miller and colleagues (2020) propose a model that begins with metacognitive awareness and progresses through becoming, internalization, and problem solving on the way to transformation. In this model, improving academic outcomes and well-being in African-American youth, for example, requires more than a hyperfocus on deficits but also an awareness and acknowledgement of strengths. It requires belief in these young people's ability to change, learn and grow from, and take transformative action in their situation (Miller et al., 2020).

Cultural Considerations When Implementing PPIs for African American Youth

As others before me have argued, it is neither considerate nor sufficient to just add diversity and stir (Rao & Donaldson, 2015) when constructing, implementing and evaluating

positive psychology interventions for African American youth and other people of color. Constructs such as happiness, flourishing, life satisfaction, and strengths look and function differently across various cultural contexts (Diener et al., 2017; Pedrotti & Edwards, 2017). And key considerations may differ too. For example, discourse on African American flourishing and well-being must also include considerations of ethnic identity; deeply rooted systemic issues of privilege, racism, and class; as well as the deleterious effects of stereotypes and incessant negative messages about abilities and self-worth (Eshun & Packer, 2016). Effective programs must often consider, include, and/or leverage core relational structures such as family, church, and community (Eshun & Packer, 2016; Gillham et al., 2019).

As I will describe in more detail in the following pages, I believe that to foster positive personal narratives and improve academic and well-being outcomes in African American adolescents, we must consider all of the above and that which is to come. We must empower these kids to acknowledge and nurture their strengths, boost agency, and reframe beliefs. We must ascribe value as we encourage them to add value. We must foster belonging as they are becoming, and we must acknowledge progress as they progress.

Next, let's explore and unpack research and findings on adolescent well-being.

Adolescent Flourishing and Well-Being

As we've already explored and research supports, there are multiple perspectives on, dimensions of, and ways to define well-being. Objective perspectives tend to emphasize material and social resources. Relational perspectives regard the personal, societal, and structural influences of others. And subjective perspectives emphasize our own perceptions of our lives and our experiences (Ross et al., 2020). Further, there's *hedonic* and *eudaimonic* well-being. The former focuses on pleasure whereas the latter tends to focus on meaning, growth, and the joy of

approaching our true potential (Waterman, 1984). *Subjective well-being (SWB)*—that is, satisfaction with life, the presence of positive affect, and the absence of negative affect (Diener, 1984)—is associated with academic achievement (Bücker et al., 2018), health, and longevity (Diener & Chan, 2011). It is distinct from *psychological well-being (PWB)*, which is about feeling good and also about functioning well (Huppert, 2009). PWB isn't about living a life absent of struggle, strife, or pain. Rather, PWB is about fostering the resources, capabilities, and support—such as autonomy, personal growth, positive relationships, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Keyes et al., 2002; Ryff, 1989)—to manage life's inevitable stressors. One is said to have optimal well-being, which tends to increase with age and education, when measures of both SWB and PWB are high (Keyes et al., 2002). One final perspective comes from a well-being measurement scale that maps to the PERMA model, outlined above, but is adapted for adolescents. The five characteristics that foster well-being in adolescents are summarized by the acronym, EPOCH. It stands for *engagement*, that is, flow or complete absorption in what one is doing; *perseverance*, that is, persistence through challenges; *optimism*, that is, hope for the future and regarding situational challenges as temporary; *connectedness*, that is, mattering to and feeling close to and loved by others; and *happiness*, that is, an overall sense of joy and contentment about one's life (Kern et al., 2016). Overall, measures of well-being can protect against depression and foster creativity, connection, and good citizenship (Waters, 2011).

In school settings, support and perceived support (Chu et al., 2010), a positive school climate, and perceived *self-efficacy* (Steinmayr, 2018)—that is, belief in one's own abilities to meet the demands of a given situation (Bandura, 1977)—have each been linked with various measures of well-being. But for some students, school can only take them so far. As Kinloch and colleagues (2017) document in a case study of two African American males, these students'

school experience is a running narrative of who they are not and what they cannot do—master narratives that have compromised their well-being. As such, these young men have turned to engagements outside of school as counternarratives and supplemental sources of *literacy*, which the authors define as means of both creating and communicating meaning (Kinloch et al., 2017).

Positive Youth Development

Created in response to negative and deficit-based perspectives of adolescents, positive youth development (PYD) programs, which underscore young people's developmental potential, began to take root in the early 2000s (Damon, 2004). Early scholars noted that structured voluntary activities (e.g., extracurricular arts or sports programs) are linked with achievement, self-control, and self-efficacy. As such, they may be more conducive to the development of initiative (i.e., intrinsic motivation and deep engagement) than standard schoolwork and/or unstructured leisure (Larson, 2000). PYD is structured activity that, among other things, seeks to accomplish at least one of the following: promote bonding and positive identity; foster resilience, self-efficacy, self-determination, hope, and/or optimism about the future (Catalano et al., 2004).

In a meta-analysis of 25 PYD programs, 96% mitigated problem behaviors (e.g. smoking and aggression) and 76% promoted positive outcomes linked with well-being (e.g., academic commitment and achievement, self-efficacy, and improved relationships; Catalano et al., 2004). Effective positive youth development programs can contribute mightily to student well-being. They can take place both inside and outside of the classroom, documenting a multitude of experiences and leveraging multimodal media.

In a qualitative study of 40 students of color enrolled in a college-preparatory summer program, participants echoed these sentiments (Dunn et al., 2022). In their own case, they were barraged with monolithic master narratives about the urban schooling experience. Their

experiences, however, were not ones of poverty, violence, or lapses in achievement. Through the PYD program, they expressed the truth of their stories through a variety of “texts,” including poetry, spoken word, video, social media posts, artwork, and expressive writing (Dunn et al., 2022).

The Well-Being and Achievement Benefits of Expressive Writing

Expressive writing—a technique that involves writing about a stressful or traumatic event 15-20 minutes for three to five days—has been linked with improved health, physiological benefits, and increases in psychological well-being (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Smyth, 1998). Initially, this practice can be distressing (e.g., negative mood and blood pressure increases) but studies have shown that the benefits persist several month post intervention (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986) and have lasted a year or more (Pennebaker et al., 1989). Findings from a meta-analysis of 21 studies examining expressive-writing interventions specifically crafted for adolescents revealed that these writing interventions produce a small but significant effect on well-being (Travagin et al., 2015). They can be particularly impactful on academic outcomes for students with emotional issues (Travagin et al., 2015). However, some experience a *self-reflection paradox* in which this expression of and reflection on intense emotion takes a negative turn toward rumination and ill-being (Kross & Ayduk, 2011; Sales et al, 2013). Distancing oneself from the writing experience (e.g., writing in third person) can help to foster more adaptive self-reflection (Kross & Ayduk, 2011).

Although some studies have found that participants reported higher well-being when writing about negative events (e.g., Lyubomirsky et al., 2006), a host of other past and present-day studies show that positively focused expressive writing interventions can be as or even more beneficial than negatively focused writing. For example, writing about one’s life goals and best

self can be equally beneficial (King, 2001). Additionally, researchers Chad Burton and Laura King (2004) explored the effects of writing about intensely positive experiences (IPEs) rather than stressful or traumatic ones. In a sample of 90 undergraduate students, roughly half were assigned to write about IPEs in 20-minute sessions over three consecutive days. The researchers found that when compared with the control group, the IPE experimental group showed immediate boosts in mood and fewer health visits three months post-intervention (Burton & King, 2004). In two randomized, double-blind field experiments at the beginning of a school year—an initial study and a follow-up replication study—two cohorts of African American ($N = 119$) and European American ($N = 124$) 7th grade students were assigned to either a treatment group in which they selected and wrote a 15-minute in-class assignment affirming their most important personal values or a control group in which they selected their least important values and for 15 minutes wrote why someone else might value them. For nearly 70% of the African American students in the collective sample, this brief and timely writing intervention reduced psychological threats and activated a cascade of small and cumulative positive events as discussed in Part I of this paper. The intervention had no effect on the European American students in the sample. But when compared to the control group, African American students earned higher grades in core academic classes by semester's end (Cohen et al., 2006). Particularly for students in the sample who were initially low achieving, the gains persisted through the following academic year (Cohen et al., 2009), and in a follow-up study 7–9 years later, those students who participated in the values-affirmation intervention were more likely to enroll in college (Goyer et al., 2017). Burton and King (2008) found that even very brief (viz., two minutes for two days) expressive writing interventions yielded positive results for participants who wrote about traumatic events as well as those who wrote about positive

experiences. In follow-up measures 4–6 weeks post-intervention, participants in each of the randomized experimental groups reported fewer health complaints than participants in the control group (Burton & King, 2008). Finally, in a recent randomized control trial ($N = 350$), students who wrote about their successes, positive experiences, and included self-as-competent themes in their narratives, showed improved academic outcomes when compared to a control group (Jones & Destin, 2021). Notably, resilience-themed narratives were not linked with any academic gains and students eventually returned to baseline, underscoring the importance of strategies and support to promote lasting change.

The literature suggests that an extracurricular positive youth development program that leverages expressive writing may indeed be an effective way to promote positive personal narratives and improve both academic and well-being outcomes for African American youth. But as we'll explore further, developing interventions that foster lasting change and long-term effects requires both consideration and precision. It's not enough to throw money and resources at another program that tells kids what to do and what to believe, or worse, that tells kids what not to do and what not to believe. In fact, such efforts may backfire (Yeager et al., 2018). To be effective, interventions for adolescents must target specific psychological processes (Walton, 2014) and afford status and respect (Yeager et al., 2018). As we'll see, some of the most effective interventions may not even seem like interventions at all to the kids who benefit from them (Walton & Wilson, 2018).

Even with limitless resources, it is not possible to intervene and change every kid's objective reality. Gratefully, this may not be the point. Again, there are multiple ways to tell the same story. Helping kids tell a different story about their lives and their experiences may be far more of a subjective endeavor in helping them to reinterpret or reframe their stories. For the

remainder of this literature review, we'll explore the three concept pillars that comprise the *OurStory* curriculum, an intervention designed to do just that. Additionally, we'll further unpack key considerations in the creation of effective interventions. The program pillars—Beliefs, Belonging, and Becoming—and the core concepts shown in Table 2 that underlie them will be critical as students craft, reframe, and continue to refine their personal narratives.

Table 2

OurStory Core Pillars and Underlying Concepts

| Core Concepts | |
|---------------|---------------------------------------|
| Beliefs | Agency, self-efficacy, growth mindset |
| Belonging | Relationships, mattering, belonging |
| Becoming | Prospection + narrative identity |

Beliefs

“Your beliefs become your thoughts. Your thoughts become your words. Your words become your actions. Your actions become your habits. Your habits become your values. Your values become your destiny”—Mohandas Gandhi (Verbatim, 2006, p. 5).

Agency. In our life stories, we are not only the main characters; we are also contributing authors. Herein lies the core concept of human agency. Put simply, agency is our ability to impact our lives and circumstances through our actions (Bandura, 2001). When we are agentic, we have the capacity for intentionality and forethought; we can both respond to and reflect on our experiences (Bandura, 2001). At different times of our lives and across diverse cultures and contexts, we exercise our agency in a variety of ways—personally, through others, or collectively (Bandura 2001). But agency scholar and pioneer Albert Bandura (2006) asserts that regardless of our culture, life stage, or context, we each require the expression of all three.

Agency first takes root during infancy. As babies, we begin to notice causal relationships in the world around us—we observe that this leads to that. Our sense of agency evolves as we discover that we can cause events and affect change in our environments and in our lives. We discover that our actions produce outcomes. (Bandura, 2006). As our life stories continue, our sense of agency flourishes or fizzles through childhood and adolescence. As the circumstances around us change, we notice that we continue; our self-identity emerges (McAdams, 1996). As our narratives continue, we learn—or we don't—that what we do matters. In either case, this shapes our beliefs.

Self-Efficacy. Beliefs are the bedrock of human agency (Bandura, 1997). In order to affect change in our lives or our circumstances we must first believe that we can. This belief that our actions can affect change is known as *self-efficacy* (Bandura, 1977; 1997). Efficacy beliefs contribute to motivation, accomplishment, and well-being (Bandura, 2006). They affect our goals and aspirations (Zimmerman et al., 1992; Bandura et al., 2001), persistence through adversity, future expectations (Caprara et al., 2006), and choices in the midst of transition (Bandura, 2006). Self-efficacy promotes better health (Bandura, 1997), improved performance (Bandura, 1982), and it has been linked with life satisfaction and positive emotions (Caprara, 2006). Both directly and indirectly, self-efficacy can affect our career trajectories (Bandura et al., 2001), academic achievement (Valentine et al., 2004), and life outcomes.

In a study of motivational orientations, 407 undergraduate students reported their GPAs and completed a questionnaire and two scales on topics of motivation, goals, and theories of intelligence. Controlling for variables of age and sex, researchers found that students with low self-efficacy perceived intelligence as fixed, whereas students with high self-efficacy persisted

through challenging coursework, prioritized mastery goals and acquiring new knowledge, and reported higher GPAs (Komarraju & Nadler, 2013).

When our efficacy beliefs are high, we are more likely to forge pathways to meaningful change. We think ahead and plan with great intention. We do what needs to be done and pivot as needed. And in the face of adversity or negative feedback, we persist, nevertheless. When our efficacy beliefs are low, however, we perceive our efforts as futile. As challenges arise—which in real life they inevitably do—we give up quickly (Bandura, 2006). We may make reasonable assumptions about ourselves or our circumstances based on our subjective experience.

Unfortunately, even if these assumptions are inaccurate or untrue, they may become self-fulfilling narratives of our life experiences (Walton & Wilson, 2018). Perhaps most detrimentally, when we face failure, we attribute it to things we are powerless to change rather than factors that we can (Bandura, 2001).

During seasons of adversity, disruption of our core beliefs—especially when we embrace and engage with potential and new possibilities—can lead to growth and positive psychological change (Roepke & Seligman, 2015). Our deeply held beliefs inform our thoughts, the stories we tell ourselves, what we believe we can accomplish, and our *cognitive styles*—that is, how we interpret and respond to the events in our lives (Bandura, 1997, Beck & Dozois, 2011; Reivich & Shatté, 2002). As discussed above, repeated threats to our identity, including stereotype threats and internalized deficiency narratives, may not only compromise performance, they may lead to low self-efficacy and *learned helplessness* (Sedik & Kofka, 1990; Seligman & Maier, 1967).

Although we're not always cognizant of the thoughts that perpetually run through our minds, their impact on our stories are also profound. For example, according to research out of the University of Pennsylvania, cognitive styles are the number-one roadblock to resilience, our

ability to rebound from setbacks (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). According to cognitive theory, it is indeed possible to become aware of and to change our thoughts and beliefs. One way is by regarding them as testable hypotheses rather than facts. We can test the validity of our thoughts and beliefs, align them to evidence, and if necessary, reframe or revise them (Beck & Dozois, 2011).

Improving outcomes, moving forward, and affecting change in the trajectories of our lives begins with beliefs. Our beliefs inform what we think, what we do, and how we respond. So, as we craft and refine our personal and collective narratives, we may need to consider our beliefs. We may need to reconsider the stories we've been told and the chapters we've written thus far. Each chapter in our life stories affords opportunities to embrace or if necessary, to revise or reframe our beliefs. For many, this begs the question of how. In short, to change our beliefs—and outcomes—we may need to revise our mindset.

Mindset. Beliefs are also central to our mindsets. Also referred to in scholarly research as *implicit theories* or *lay theories* (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), *mindsets* are our deeply held assumptions about whether or not our personal attributes or characteristics can change (Dweck et al., 1995). Often implicitly, we craft explanations for many of the events that occur in our lives. These "theories" are at the root of our mindsets (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), and they can influence the tenor of a student's transition from high school to college (Yeager et al., 2016).

A *growth mindset* is a theory of intelligence or a belief that with effort, our intelligence and intellectual abilities can develop and change. Conversely, a *fixed mindset* is the belief that our intelligence is set and cannot be changed (Dweck & Leggett, 1988; Yeager & Dweck, 2012). Extensive research on the topics, in both lab and field experiments, has shown that a fixed mindset can impede effort, hinder persistence, and undermine achievement (Dweck & Leggett,

1988). A growth mindset can improve academic outcomes (e.g., Blackwell et al., 2007; Yeager et al., 2016; Yeager et al., 2019; Yeager et al., 2022), predict goal setting and achievement (Burnette et al., 2013), promote resilience (Yeager & Dweck, 2012), and in some cases, mitigate the deleterious effects of poverty (Claro et al., 2016). The positive academic effects of a growth mindset are most pronounced among low-achieving students (e.g., Paunesku et al., 2015; Yeager & Dweck, 2020; Yeager et al., 2019) and in environments or with people that support and reinforce its growth and development (Yeager et al., 2019; Yeager et al., 2022).

Mindset interventions have received a great deal of national attention, not only for their effectiveness but also for their scalability (Yeager & Dweck, 2020). For instance, in a study of nearly 1,600 students in 13 geographically diverse high schools, students were randomly assigned to one of two experimental groups—growth mindset or sense-of-purpose—or a control group. To the growth mindset group, researchers delivered a brief, online module about the brain-changing effects of hard work and the value of good strategies in tackling challenging tasks. Students were instructed to summarize the module content in their own words and to draft a letter of encouragement to a struggling student. Among low-achieving students in both experimental groups, the interventions raised their GPAs in core academic classes by 6.4% (Paunesku et al, 2015). Another self-administered growth-mindset intervention for a nationally representative sample of U.S. high school students ($N = 6,320$) delivered in less than an hour yielded similar results. Engaging only with online content, students learned, then subsequently taught younger students, that the brain is like a muscle that grows stronger and smarter through rigorous learning. Again, lower achieving students in the experimental group improved their GPAs, and they enrolled in advanced math courses in higher numbers (Yeager et al., 2019).

These brief online growth-mindset interventions at scale have yielded positive results with college matriculation rates as well. Across three randomized control, double-blind experiments ($N > 9,500$), researchers delivered a lay theory intervention designed to normalize common challenges in students' transition from high school to college. In the experimental group—comprised of 90% of the entering class—students received an article and accounts from older students' experiences, emphasizing a growth mindset and the value of working hard and persisting through challenging tasks. In concert with a social-belonging intervention, this intervention increased full-time student enrollment of first-generation and ethnic-minority students by 4%, increased students' GPAs at a selective private university, and reduced the number of negatively stereotyped students overly represented in the bottom 20% of the class (Yeager et al., 2016).

But social psychologists caution that mindset interventions are neither magic nor a panacea (Yeager & Walton, 2011). Context is critical, and they don't work the same for all students under every circumstance (Miller, 2019; Yeager & Dweck, 2020). Although the pre-college intervention in the study detailed above affected matriculation rates, it did not impact college completion rates of the negatively stereotyped students in the sample (Yeager et al., 2016). A randomized study of a growth mindset intervention delivered to an ethnically diverse sample of 10th grade adolescent girls living in rural Southeastern U.S. ($N = 222$) found that although students in the experimental group reported increases in their growth mindset, the intervention showed null effects on their grades or academic attitudes (Burnette et al., 2018). Additionally, findings across three longitudinal studies of early adolescents ($N = 207, 897$, and 2325) illuminated the importance of concurrent *metacognitive skills*. This capacity to reflect on what one is learning predicted higher math engagement among students in the samples.

Consequently, researchers recommend reinforcing metacognitive skills with growth mindset interventions—particularly among students from socioeconomically disadvantaged schools (Wang et al., 2021).

Our beliefs are indeed foundational to our sense of agency, self-efficacy, and to our mindset. And each of the above can promote positive psychological, performance, and life outcomes. However, decades of mindset research affirm that beliefs alone are insufficient to precipitate change. Change often requires action. Additionally, context is a key player in the adoption of beliefs (Hecht et al., 2021; Yeager & Dweck, 2020) and the likelihood of action. To be effective, belief-changing interventions must often be coupled with co-interventions designed to reinforce these beliefs in our environments—at home, in the classroom, in the community, (Hecht et al., 2021) and/or with the people in our lives. It's to these people that we'll turn our attention next.

Belonging

“A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all women, men, and children. We are biologically, cognitively, physically, and spiritually wired to love, to be loved, and to belong” –Brené Brown (2010, p. 26).

Positive Relationships. Developing and maintaining positive relationships and group memberships is one of our earliest and most critical developmental tasks (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1988). Additionally, relationships and connection are foundational to several models of well-being. As explored above, for example, in Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, positive relationships are one of the five key pillars. And in her review of the core components of psychological well-being common across multiple well-being theories, Ryff (1989) also identified positive relationships in addition to autonomy, environmental mastery, personal

growth, purpose, and self-acceptance. Similarly, self-determination theory asserts that as humans we have three primary psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In addition to *autonomy* (i.e., freedom to choose) and *competence* (i.e., effectiveness or mastery in our pursuits), we each possess an inherent need for *relatedness*, that is, a need for belonging and connection with others. When these three needs are met, scholars contend, it promotes motivation and mental health. But when they go unmet, motivation diminishes and our well-being is compromised (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

The benefits in, around, and through our relationships abound. A meta-analysis of 246 studies showed a small but positive connection between social support and well-being. Specifically, social support was closely linked with self-concept and perceived social support with well-being (Chu et al., 2010). Social support has been linked with higher self-worth in low-income African American youth (McMahon et al., 2011). And perceived social support is positively linked with health, longevity, stress-management, and immune functioning (Cohen & Herbert, 1996). Relational caring and connection can protect adolescents from high-risk behaviors (Resnick et al., 1993), and connection across the key relationships in our lives, such as family, school, peers, and neighborhood, promotes well-being (Jose et al., 2012). How we interact matters as well. For instance, both sharing and enthusiastically responding to one another's good news not only enhances our connections but is also linked with positive emotions and relational well-being (Conoley et al., 2015; Gable et al., 2004). Our lives are often shaped, punctuated, and/or enhanced by the presence of others. And in our stories, as positive psychology pioneer Chris Peterson (2006) often said, "other people matter" (p. 249).

Mattering. *Mattering*, purports community psychologist Isaac Prilleltensky (2014), is a human pursuit along with the pursuit of well-being that make our lives meaningful and

worthwhile. Distinct from but rooted in belonging, which we will explore in more detail below, mattering is a close proxy that can contribute to both individual and collective well-being.

Mattering is the perpetual dance—in our families, friendships, schools, communities, and in the world—between impact (i.e., agency and self-efficacy) and recognition (e.g., the need for inclusion, appreciation, and belonging; Prilleltensky, 2014). Mattering, which balances self with others, is the dance of "feeling valued and adding value" (Prilleltensky, 2020, p. 16). Optimally, as we feel valued, we're more likely to add value, and as we add value, we're more likely to feel valued. This virtuous cycle of giving and receiving—of feeling both valued and valuable—can promote connection and belonging (Crocker et al, 2017). According to Prilleltensky (2020), the need for both mattering and belonging are at the root of many of our behaviors. And each will be critical in the *OurStory* workshops and curriculum, which we will explore further in Part III of this paper.

The Need to Belong. The need to belong—that is, to develop and sustain ongoing relationships with others, is a primal and powerful motivator (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In Maslow's (1968) oft-cited hierarchy of needs, our need for love and belonging is preceded only by our basic biological needs for food, water, shelter, and safety. Although this need manifests differently across peoples and cultures, pioneering scholars on the topic, Roy Baumeister & Mark Leary (1995) contend that this need is universal. Our need for belonging, also referred to as *belongingness*, affects how we think, feel, and act. Acceptance, inclusion, or the presence of belonging can foster health, well-being, and a host of positive emotions, including contentment or joy. Conversely, rejection, exclusion, or the absence of belonging can lead to mental or physical unrest, behavioral issues, and negative emotions, such as depression or grief (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

In students, *belonging uncertainty*—a potential consequence of underrepresentation, stereotypes, and/or stigmatization—can undermine student achievement and motivation (Walton & Cohen, 2007). However, perceptions of belonging have been shown to improve academic outcomes (e.g., Williams et al., 2020) and decrease achievement and health disparities (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2011). In a series of experiments that diminished college students' social-belonging doubts, the post-intervention grades of the African American students in a multi-racial sample increased (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Further, a meta-analysis of belonging and secondary-education outcomes in high school students revealed a small-to-moderate correlation between school belonging and motivational (e.g., mastery goal orientation), social-emotional (e.g., self-efficacy), and behavioral (e.g., engagement) outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2020). School belonging has been linked to higher enjoyment during school years characterized by a sense of belonging versus those characterized by an absence of belonging (Neel & Fuligni, 2013). And it is negatively linked with school absences and dropout rates (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Even cues of *mere belonging*, minor or chance connections with others, can add value, affect motivation, and influence self-identity (Walton et al., 2012).

Brief social-belonging interventions, which normalize concerns about belonging during academic transitions and position these challenges as both transient and improvable, have shown profound and lasting effects on both African American high school students (e.g., Williams et al., 2020) and college students (e.g., Walton & Cohen, 2011) in particular. The seminal randomized one-hour intervention ($N = 92$) improved GPAs, plus reported health and well-being three years post intervention of the African American college students ($N = 49$) in the study sample (Walton & Cohen, 2011). In a longitudinal follow-up study of the original sample, the African American adults who received the intervention as students 7–11 years earlier reported

greater career satisfaction, higher psychological well-being, and higher civic and community engagement (Brady et al., 2020). Although these adults didn't recall the one-hour intervention from the early days of their college years, it normalized common challenges and set in motion a cascade of events in which they were agents of change in their lives and subsequent experiences. Many established mentor relationships in college and thereafter, which improved their social circumstances and promoted positive outcomes soon after the intervention and for many years beyond (Brady et al., 2020; Walton & Wilson, 2018).

So yes, a foundation of reading, writing, and arithmetic is critical to students' future success. But connection, mattering, and belonging have the potential not only to foster well-being but also to influence the trajectory of our students' lives. As such, the latter may be just as important in shaping global citizens who will add value to the world (Prilleltensky, 2020). Programs that foster belonging—particularly for those in the minority or at the margins—may also be critical as adolescents practice flexing their strengths, craft and refine their personal narratives, and add value to the collective as they transition to adulthood.

Becoming

“For me, becoming isn't about arriving somewhere or achieving a certain aim. I see it instead as forward motion, a means of evolving, a way to reach continuously toward a better self. The journey doesn't end” – Michelle Obama (2018, p. 417).

Prospection and Narrative Identity. Despite the depths of our diversity and the ranges in our representation, as humans, we share many things in common. Similar to animals we can process life as it occurs in the here and now. But uniquely human is our ability to reflect on the past, to predict consequences, to simulate possibilities, to imagine the future, and to look to any

of these mental simulations to inform our actions in the present moment (Baumeister et al., 2016; Gilbert & Wilson, 2007).

In explorations of motivation, generations of psychological theory and research have focused primarily on just one dimension of this aspect of our humanity: the past. However, in recent years, positive psychology pioneer, Martin Seligman and colleagues (2013) contested the underpinnings of this emphasis and its underlying assumptions when they proposed that expectation is the basis of motivation. Rather than being driven by the past, they contended, our actions are pulled by the future. Findings from their theoretical examination on the topic suggest that *prospection*—that is, our mental simulations of possible futures (Gilbert & Wilson, 2007)—is at the heart of motivation. It informs the way we think and feel, as well as the way we act. Prospection, they argue, is a key driver of human behavior (Seligman et al., 2013).

The past is in the past, and there is nothing we can do to change it. In contrast, the future is not only changeable, it also offers a matrix of potentialities and possibilities (Baumeister et al., 2016). If our thoughts, emotions, motivations, and behaviors are driven solely by an inalterable past, this reality can undermine our sense of agency, and we may be less inclined to even consider the future. But if an undetermined future is something we have the power to change, and it is shaped at least in part by our choices in the present, we're not only more likely to consider it, but it can also draw us toward action, enhancing our sense of agency (Baumeister et al., 2016; Seligman et al., 2013).

Seligman and colleagues (2013) suggest that the past is not a force that elicits passive reactions, but rather, it's a source we can use to inform intentional action and future possibilities. They suggest that the future, with its many possible outcomes, can influence our thoughts, emotions, and motivation and guide us toward intelligent action that supports its manifestation

(see also Baumeister et al, 2016). The scholars differentiate between *drive* and *desire*, noting that the former is positioned from a place of lack and motivation to alleviate discomfort, whereas the latter is active and positioned from a posture of attraction (Seligman et al., 2013).

Oftentimes, prospection is an adaptive process that can foster positive developmental outcomes. And conceptualizing the *ideal self*—that is, a vision for a desired future, hope, and a sense of identity—can facilitate intentional and sustainable change (Boyatzis & Akrivou, 2006). Again, writing about our life goals and best-possible self has been linked with increased well-being (King, 2001). Additionally, prospection has been shown to promote self-regulatory behavior (e.g., Cheng et al., 2012) and prosociality (Baumsteiger, 2017). It can be a practical means of guiding our decision making to bring about desired outcomes (Baumeister et al., 2016), and some scholars theorize that it may be an effective tool in cultivating purpose (Bronk & Mitchell, 2022). However, negative prospection (e.g., an inability to envision future possibilities or negative beliefs about the future) may reinforce cycles of adversity, lead to feelings of helplessness, and may be a critical cause of depression (Roepke & Seligman, 2016). If this is indeed the case, therapy and/or interventions designed to revise negative beliefs about the future may be a more promising path to positive outcomes than excavating the roots of those negative beliefs from the depth of a past we cannot change (Seligman et al., 2013).

One study exploring *posttraumatic growth (PTG)*—that is, the positive changes that follow life challenges (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004)—randomly assigned a sample of adults ($N = 188$) who had recently endured adversity to one of three groups. The first group engaged in weekly prospective-writing exercises exploring potential possibilities following the hardships. The second group engaged in weekly factual-writing exercises. And the third group engaged in no weekly writing assignments over the course of the month. At the end of the intervention,

participants in the prospective writing group showed the most dramatic increases in PTG but not in retrospective PTG (Roepke et al., 2018).

In our life stories, moving from our past through our present experiences to a future reality requires sequential action through meaningfully connected events. This is narrative structure. Prospection is often a process of narrative structure (Baumeister, 2016). As McAdams (1985) notes, we construct narratives to make meaning of our lives. As such, regarding the present moment as a chapter, page, or word in an ongoing story can add value and meaning to the moment. And from a prospection perspective, the future offers the hope, promise, and possibility of still-to-be-written chapters pulling our stories forward.

Both our pasts and our futures can inform our life stories and narrative identity in the present. Collective and societal narratives can influence our personal narratives as well. Narrative-identity revision and meaning making is a developmental (Fivush et al., 2017) and life-long task (McAdams, 1985), and the growth, transformation, and redemption characteristic of well-being stories are ongoing processes of becoming (Bauer et al., 2008; McAdams, 1985). As we encounter new experiences, overcome adversity, reframe our beliefs, leverage our strengths, lean on our loved ones, and shift our mindsets, we will continually revise our narratives (McAdams, 1985; McLean, 2008). And as our stories unfold, we will keep refining and revising them. Now, we'll turn our attention to the intentional actions we can take to improve our life stories.

Wise and Effective Interventions

As we've explored, the transition from high school to higher education as well as the college application process and practices are marked by several potential threats to well-being and positive outcomes, particularly for African American youth. However, this transition and its

existing practices present strategic intervention opportunities as well. To recap, fixing problems or alleviating suffering is not the focus of positive psychology (Seligman, 1999). Although there are certainly times, places, and populations for whom this level of psychological emphasis and support is warranted, the emphasis of positive psychology is primarily to promote flourishing and well-being through intentional action (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). For some African American students, their baseline genetics and/or life circumstances may be suboptimal in the pursuit of happiness. But again, as Lyubomirsky and collaborators (2005) suggest these two factors comprise only a portion of the well-being equation. Deliberate, intentional, volitional activities can play a critical role as well. As the researchers contend, we may not be able to easily change our circumstances or our biological baselines, but we each possess the power to change our actions. As such, our activities may be the best pathway to well-being (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

PPIs have been a historically effective tool in boosting happiness and well-being in individuals (Seligman et al., 2005; Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). These effects may be optimal in conditions where an activity is well-aligned to the person engaging in it (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2013). However, evolutions in the field have illuminated the need to grow beyond the early off-the-shelf PPIs to a new evidenced-based and innovative generation of interventions. Advances like Pawelski's (2020) elements model, detailed above, have aided in the analysis and synthesis of new interventions. And yet, even as more individuals thrive, systemic social problems persist. Inequalities threaten to diminish people's sense of agency (Coleman et al., 1966) and life pursuits. Further, many interventions—in positive psychology and beyond—intending to improve people's lives and experiences alter outcomes in the short term only for study participants to adapt and eventually return to baseline (Lyubomirsky et al., 2005).

Overhauling systems and grand-scale interventions are not only expensive, but in many cases, they may also be unrealistic and ineffective. However, promising work from the field of social psychology suggests that brief and simple interventions targeting specific psychological processes may be an effective, enduring, and scalable way to affect student outcomes (Walton, 2014).

Many of the issues we explored earlier in this paper including deficiency narratives, maladaptive beliefs, and belonging uncertainty involve psychology (Walton, 2014). Social psychologists contend that many such issues are rooted in predictable and universal psychological patterns (Walton & Wilson, 2018). Notably, however, we don't all experience the same objective circumstances in the same way. Rather, our experiences—often based on reasonable inferences—are subjective. From a social psychology perspective, our subjective interpretations, or the meaning we make, of ourselves and our circumstances determine how we behave and are motivated by our needs for accuracy, self-integrity, and belonging (Walton & Wilson, 2018). Similarly, the stories we tell (and believe) are also interpretations of subjective experiences. Importantly, if this is indeed the case, we can interpret them differently.

Revising, refining, or changing the way we think or the meaning we make of our lives and our experiences is at the heart of *wise interventions* (Walton, 2014; Walton & Wilson, 2018). Similar to PPIs, these research-based interventions aim to promote flourishing by precisely targeting specific psychological processes. Examples highlighted earlier in this paper include reframing academic challenges through a growth mindset intervention (Blackwell et al., 2007), normalizing the struggles of a college transition through a social belonging intervention (Walton & Cohen, 2011), or boosting students' self-integrity through a values-affirmation writing

intervention (Cohen et al., 2009). These brief interventions have improved well-being and achievement outcomes without overhauling anything.

According to social psychologists, Greg Walton and Timothy Wilson (2018), wise interventions operate under the assumption that most people are capable and most circumstances possess room for improvement, but they're not functioning optimally due in part to psychological barriers. Oftentimes, these interventions leverage existing programs, processes, and people—complementing rather than replacing systems and resources. They are light-touch interventions that don't tell people what to do, how to think, or what to believe. Rather, they orient people in the direction of change and empower them to internalize the change themselves. They covertly challenge implicit beliefs through tactics including leading questions, presenting new information, implying new meaning, and active reflection. And lastly, importantly, they target perpetual processes, which can aid in enduring change (Walton & Wilson, 2018).

With all of the above in mind, I would like to now introduce early concepts for *OurStory*, a research-inspired narrative intervention that uses college essays as a point of entry. This program can help to address many of the issues we explored in Part I. And it was inspired and informed by the research and literature we unpacked in Part II. So now, on to Part III.

Part III—Application Plan | *OurStory*: A Wise Positive Intervention

OurStory is a reciprocity program for high school juniors and seniors that leverages the college admission essay and essay-writing process to help students reframe beliefs and shape positive personal narratives. It is rooted in core concepts from positive psychology, social psychology, and narrative psychology that have been shown to promote well-being and positive academic outcomes (e.g., Bandura, 1997; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Prilleltensky, 2019; Walton & Cohen, 2011). It is based on much of the research we have explored above, including

personal and collective narratives, counternarratives, positive youth development programs, expressive writing, positive psychology and wise interventions, as well as concepts including agency and prospection. And it is inspired by work that has been shown to challenge dominant deficit narratives (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Miller et al., 2020), normalize first-year college challenges, and narrow achievement gaps (Yeager et al., 2016).

Based on key takeaways from this research, I plan to create and launch *OurStory* with a series of pilot workshops and a companion curriculum. Guided by writing prompts, personal reflection, partner feedback, and group discussion, students in the program will work with the same essay through a process of revision. They will connect and collaborate with a partner and/or cohort of other students throughout the essay-refinement process. And at the program's conclusion, students who elect to will share, and together, reflect on their final essays.

The pilot program will consist of three workshop modules—Beliefs, Belonging, and Becoming—which I've expanded on below. Preceding the program will be a fourth introductory module—Beginning—which students will complete independently before we come together. This pre-workshop module will begin as we have begun—affirming students' virtues and strengths. It will introduce them to positive psychology, affirm their collective and individual strengths, and offer tips as they select an essay prompt and write their first draft.

Although any student who wishes to participate in *OurStory* is welcome, its primary audience is African American 11th and 12th grade students. Secondly, I plan to target high school juniors and seniors who 1) are from underrepresented racial and ethnic minority groups; 2) have been identified by teachers and/or school counselors as ones who have expressed interest in—but concerns about—attending college; and/or 3) qualify for free- or reduced-price meals.

Although it is targeted, the content will likely be relevant and useful to a broader audience of students as well.

As I shared in Part I, I suspect that for many of these students, writing a college admission essay may be one of the first times they attempt to clarify their values and write a cohesive personal narrative. These college-bound and/or college-curious students are crafting these narratives during a critical developmental period (Steinberg, 2005) at the outset of a critical season of life transition. Based on the research I presented above, I believe this well-timed ubiquitous narrative tool presents an opportunity not only to boost college matriculation and post-secondary outcomes in marginalized students but also to increase their flourishing and well-being.

It's important to note, however, that most students' main objective for joining these workshops will be to start, improve, or complete their admission essays. This primary task must not get lost in the psychological mix. The program isn't about dictating what students write or how they construct their essays. Rather, it is about creating space and community for them to write, reflect on, and revise these narratives. For them, the potential academic and psychological benefits intentionally baked into the program design may be an unexpected bonus.

Curriculum Modules

Each module of the *OurStory* curriculum will follow the same basic format. Modules will include writing prompts; reflection and discussion questions; a pillar-based psychoeducation paragraph that summarizes research from the literature review of this paper; essay-revision homework; a pillar-aligned quote; and an essay-writing tip. Below, in Tables 3–5, I've outlined the primary objectives, core concepts, and sample prompts for each module.

Beliefs. Our beliefs are both the source and the substance of our stories (Bandura, 1997; Langellier, 1989). They shape and are shaped by our experiences. They color how we see and experience the world (Clifton et al., 2019) and impact how we think (Beck & Dozois, 2011), what we do, and what we think we can do (Bandura, 1997, Beck & Dozois, 2011). Put simply, our beliefs impact our actions which impact our outcomes. Week one will unearth some of these beliefs, invite students to rethink their beliefs, and consider alternatives.

Table 3

Overview / Beliefs Module

| Curriculum Element | Description |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Objective | To help students identify the beliefs underlying their personal narratives and consider how their beliefs can impact their outcomes. |
| Core Concepts | agency, self-efficacy, growth mindset |
| Sample Reflection + Discussion | What are your strengths? Describe a time when you were at your best. What have others—your parents, your friends, your teachers, your community, your culture—told you about yourself? Are they right? What evidence supports these beliefs? What evidence refutes them? What is the story that people who don't know you are likely to miss (J. Mattis, personal communication, September 7, 2021)? Who do you believe that you are? |
| Essay-Revision Prompt | What does your essay say about who you are and what you believe? Based on your reading, conversations, and experiences this week, what can you say differently? |

Belonging. A basic human motivator and need (Bauermeister & Leary, 1995), belonging has been shown to decrease achievement and health inequalities (Walton & Cohen, 2011). As students grow more comfortable with one another, they will be encouraged to consider and share their strengths, adding value to the group. As they add value, they're more likely to feel valued, and so the virtuous cycle and the dance between self and others begins (Prilleltensky, 2020).

Table 4*Overview / Belonging Module*

| Curriculum Element | Description |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Objective | To help students identify the positive relationships in their lives and to consider how adding value to others has and can contribute to their own sense of belonging. |
| Core Concepts | relationships, mattering, belonging |
| Sample Reflection + Discussion | To whom do you matter? Who matters most to you? Who has helped you to cultivate your strengths? What challenges have you faced this year? How have you overcome them? Who has helped? How might this help you in the future? When was a time you were helpful? How have you added value to your family, friends, school, or community? What or who has kept you from adding value? Who do you believe that you are? |
| Essay-Revision Prompt | What does your essay say about how you matter, who matters to you, and with whom you belong? Based on your reading, conversations, and experiences this week, what can you say differently? |

Becoming. During the final module, students will share their essays and reflect on one another's stories. Importantly, we will discuss that even once the essays are written, our stories are continually evolving (McAdams, 1985). The best of ourselves is still unwritten and can continue to draw us forward (Seligman et al., 2013). Students will explore additional contexts (e.g., music, social media, and visual arts) that they can use to share their strengths, include others, co-create future program iterations, and add value to a story bigger than their own.

Table 5*Overview / Becoming Module*

| Curriculum Element | Description |
|--------------------------------|---|
| Objective | To help students regard themselves as agents in their lives and to regard both their past and future life experiences as motivation for growth and progress in the present. |
| Core Concepts | prospection, narrative identity |
| Sample Reflection + Discussion | How have you improved over the last three weeks? What have you done that is working well? What have you changed that is working better? Where would you like to be a year from now? What does the best version of yourself in 10 years look like? What steps are you taking now to get there? Which possibilities have you discovered that you didn't see before? What do you want the next students coming through this program to know? What value have you added to the group? How do you intend to take this value with you? Who do you believe that you are? |
| Essay-Revision Prompt | What does your essay say about who you are and who you're becoming? Based on your readings, conversations, and experiences this week? What can you say differently? |

Program-Development Considerations

At this early program-development stage, the optimal timing, format, and duration of each module is still to be determined. Initially, I would like to experiment with both a long-weekend retreat format as well as 3–4 hour workshops over three consecutive weekends. Research suggests that the program duration may not be as important as its peak and its conclusion. Specifically, we tend to give more weight to the peak and the end of an experience in our retrospective evaluation of the overall experience (Kahneman et al., 1993). So, most importantly, I intend for this program to begin and end well.

To evaluate the program's effectiveness, before our first session, I'll invite students to complete a brief questionnaire, provide a copy of their high school transcript, and take both the VIA Inventory of Strengths for Youth (Park & Peterson, 2006; Peterson & Seligman, 2004) and

the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-being (Kern et al., 2016). Additionally, I will randomly select 5–10 students to participate in pre- and post-intervention interviews. Immediately following our final session, I'll ask each participant to retake the EPOCH scale and complete a post-intervention evaluation. At the end of each academic semester through students' high-school graduation, I will request a copy of their school transcripts, noting any changes. Since this is a writing intervention, I can also recruit help to qualitatively analyze student narratives and interview responses to evaluate how the words students use to describe themselves and their experiences change over time. I plan to work with local high schools to compare college matriculation rates of students who participate in the program and those who do not—understanding the limits in demonstrating the effectiveness of a self-selected intervention versus one of random assignment. As program interest grows, I may be able to explore comparisons with waitlist control groups as well. In any case, my priority is to eventually accommodate every student who wishes to participate.

OurStory is rooted in a desire for greater equity in college preparation and better outcomes for students of color, especially African American adolescents. But it is not about reforming the college application process, improving schools, rewriting policy, or even about teaching new habits and behaviors. It is working within an existing system and capitalizing on changes already at work within that system to try to affect young people's subjective experience. Importantly, it leverages a personal narrative that kids are already motivated to write. *OurStory* targets specific psychological processes and meets all three needs addressed by wise interventions (i.e., accuracy, self-integrity, and belonging) and includes several of their core strategies as well, including identity labeling, leading questions, and values affirmation. The

program introduces core positive psychology concepts and offers multiple pathways to well-being.

Future Directions

OurStory is just in the infancy of its development, and it offers many possibilities for future growth, including mentorship initiatives, family and community-based programming and outreach, co-curricular integration, and/or a basis for empirical research. To date, narrative research has primarily focused on assessing narratives to *predict* well-being and academic achievement. Eventually, I would like to explore if and how revising a narrative can *influence* well-being and academic achievement. In the immediate, I intend to build on a firm foundation of extant literature, which along with early feedback from students, I will use to create and refine curriculum content and program deliverables. I intend to leverage these insights to inform future workshop iterations and to scale this program beyond my small community. My next step is to transition from planning to action. Even still, *OurStory* is just a beginning.

Limitations

Admittedly, this PYD program has its limits and is insufficient to unravel the deep systemic issues faced by many of the students for whom it was created. It targets young people who are already considering higher education, but it will likely miss some students who have written college off as a viable future option. Further, this program is designed for high school juniors and seniors, but I wonder if a future iteration may be more impactful for younger adolescents. Although the extracurricular workshop format can foster engagement and motivation (Larson, 2000), I wonder if it might be more effective in schools. The format may allow for swifter implementation than a school-based program would require, but it may also discourage students with family, work, sports, or other weekend commitments from

participating. Each student's context will affect how they experience and benefit from this program. And it is important to note that improving college matriculation rates may have limited effects on college completion rates. The natural world teaches us the importance of planting seeds in fertile soil, nurturing them with sunlight and water, and recognizing that threats outside of our control may compromise their well-being. In the same way, this intervention is far more likely to take root and flourish for students who have home, school, work, and/or community relationships and environments that will nurture and support their growth. And it is more likely to falter for those students who don't.

And yet, for at least some students, *OurStory* is a strategic intervention during a critical developmental juncture, which can plant seeds of change, counter destructive societal narratives, and foster more positive personal ones. I anticipate that these students' final personal narratives will reflect growth and transformation. I expect to see this program help more of them get to college. And I hope that *OurStory* will encourage them and others—students and educators alike—to reframe the college admission essay as an opportunity to improve their well-being along the way.

Our Story Continues . . .

Throughout this paper, I have referred to *OurStory* as a positive youth development program and a wise positive intervention. As I have imagined a better future for more African American adolescents, I have described both positive academic outcomes and positive psychological outcomes. And at the outset of this paper, I devoted an entire section to the science of well-being, positive psychology. As you've likely noticed, the common thread in each of the above is the term "positive." My intention in using this term so frequently throughout this paper is neither a matter of prescription nor denial.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that a college degree is the best or only pathway to well-being for all African American adolescents. Some students will elect to work or learn a trade or start a family immediately after high school, and for those students, these are respect-worthy decisions. Again, autonomy—that is, freedom to choose, is also included in several theories of well-being (e.g., Ryan & Deci, 2000; Ryff, 1989). But there is another contingency of students who have elected against college not as a matter of choice but as a matter of resignation. These are the students for whom this intervention was created. These are the students whom I hope *OurStory* will reach.

Additionally, while many African Americans are thriving, others continue to struggle and face challenges and adversity that must be acknowledged and addressed (Mattis et al., 2016). In some cases, we do have health, wealth, and achievement gaps to overcome (DeFreitas, 2020). However, this is only part of our story. Despite a history marked by dehumanization, disregard, and subsequent adversity, African Americans have made positive strides in life expectancy, financial status, and education (Mattis et al. 2016). To limit our stories to tales of deficiency and deny this progress can not only result in helplessness and defeat (M. Seligman, personal communication, December 5, 2021) in ourselves and our children, it can compromise our well-being and potential to add value to a greater human story.

Our story is one of resilience and strength. Our story is one of diversity and cultural wealth. Our story is one of belief in ourselves and our abilities. Our story is one of improvement and growth. Our story is one of love and belonging. Our story is one of hope and becoming. Our story is still being written.

OurStory is an opportunity to reclaim our story.

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