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A CHARACTER STRENGTHS INTERVENTION FOR UNIVERSIDAD METROPOLITANA'S STUDENTS

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Abstract

The transition to university life represents a significant psychological and academic challenge for students, as it entails shifting from a structured school environment to a more independent setting that demands greater personal responsibility. Many studies have shown that Positive Psychology applied in educational contexts, specifically through the development of character strengths, has proven to be an effective strategy for addressing these challenges. At Universidad Metropolitana (UNIMET), institutional regulations identify a specific group of students at academic risk who are required to participate in the Academic Improvement Program (PMA). However, the institution currently lacks interventions based on character strengths specifically tailored to this population. This study aimed to design a character strength-based intervention proposal for PMA students using a feasible project methodology. A comparative analysis of previous research on character strengths interventions was conducted, leading to the development of a 10-week program structure. This program integrates mindfulness strategies, techniques for habit formation and the development of both signature and lesser strengths. As a result of this study an intervention manual is developed and explained, its viability suggests it should be implemented as a complement to the PMA. This proposal has the potential to enhance the well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance of students at risk.

Keywords: academic performance, character strengths, mental health, psychological well-being, psycho-educational intervention, university education.

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1. Introduction

The transition to higher education represents a critical process that requires significant psychological, physiological, and intrapersonal adjustments. Students face new academic responsibilities and financial pressures that often lead to anxiety and negatively affect academic performance (Alarcón, 2019; Díaz & Castro, 2020). Specifically, a study conducted in Colombia showed that 63.2% of the sample suffered from anxiety and 44.9% from depression, both of which have been shown to have significant relationships with academic demands, gender, low income, and even sexual orientation (Arias-Coronel et al., 2025). Likewise, in Latin America, a consistent correlation has been observed over time between high levels of anxiety, depression, and stress and poor academic performance and a higher risk of dropping out (Salas et al., 2025). Consequently, students with poor academic performance may experience a higher degree of psychological distress.

In Venezuela, moreover, students face additional challenges that affect their ability to continue their studies, as they are impacted by interruptions in public services such as water or electricity, as well as impoverishment resulting from the economic crisis—a situation that has led to only 66% of the population being able to remain in school (Andrés Bello Catholic University [UCAB], 2024).

Traditionally, predicting academic success has focused on intellectual factors; however, current evidence suggests that these are limited predictors in the long term. In fact, a statistically significant relationship has been demonstrated between emotional intelligence and academic performance, thus highlighting the importance of the emotional aspect in academic success (Carrillo-Galán et al., 2020). Consequently, variables such as emotional intelligence, attitudes toward learning, and motivation have emerged as more robust predictors of academic performance (Arias et al., 2020; Shankland and Rosset, 2017; Karris et al., 2021).

In addition to this, psychology has for many years been dedicated to the corrective study of psychological distress. However, the recent emergence of positive psychology as a science dedicated to investigating the factors that contribute to human well-being has represented a paradigm shift in the study of psychology, which now seeks, in a preventive and promotive manner, to strengthen people's health, understanding well-being as a multidimensional construct that goes beyond the absence of illness.

One of the current models for understanding well-being is Seligman's PERMA model, which proposes an approach centered on five core elements: *positive emotions*, engagement,

relationships, *meaning*, and accomplishment (Seligman, 2011). A cross-cutting component of these dimensions is character strengths, which correspond to stable and cultivable personality traits that, when developed, foster human flourishing and resilience (Arias et al., 2020). These can be acquired through practice, are stable over time, and their use can be observed repeatedly in different contexts. Furthermore, they are valued in and of themselves due to the positive consequences they generate and the positive emotions they elicit in those who exercise them (Seligman, 2011).

Although positive psychology does not seek to address health problems in a corrective manner, current studies have provided compelling evidence of the effectiveness of strengths-based interventions. They have been shown to improve resilience and promote academic performance, engagement, and immersion (Arias et al., 2020); accelerate learning, improve academic performance, reinforce feelings of competence, and increase academic motivation (Shankland & Rosset, 2017); increase life satisfaction, positive affect, and happiness; and reduce the prevalence of mental health disorders such as anxiety and depression, while mitigating negative affect (Karris et al., 2021). Together, these findings underscore the profound impact that the development and application of character strengths can have on fostering holistic well-being and academic flourishing among students.

Intervention designs in this area rely heavily on several key components, such as the initial identification of strengths through psychometric assessments, the exploration of relevant variables, reflective practices such as meditation and breathing exercises, or various dynamics and specific strength-building techniques (Barranca et al., 2021; Chérif et al., 2021; Green, 2022; Kennes et al., 2023).

Despite these benefits, at Venezuelan institutions such as the Metropolitan University (UNIMET), underperforming students—who are grouped in the Academic Improvement Program (PMA)—lack specific strategies based on this approach. Consequently, this study proposes the design of a character-strengths-based intervention specifically targeted at this population and its context, with the aim of providing tools that mitigate the risk of dropping out and promote their academic and professional success. To achieve this, the study aimed to identify the characteristics and key elements of such interventions among university students, select and adapt instructional strategies for the activities, and, finally, establish a program with sessions and objectives designed to promote their character strengths.

2. Method

This research was a feasibility project aimed at proposing a model to address the challenges faced by the PMA population through a literature review and a feasibility analysis. The methodology involved several stages: diagnosis and theoretical foundation, methodological

procedure, planning of activities and resources, and feasibility analysis (Universidad Pedagógica Experimental Libertador, 2016).

The research design involved a literature review. First, extensive material on the topic was compiled; then, irrelevant information was filtered out, and the key data from the remaining documents were compared and analyzed (Reyes-Ruiz and Carmona-Alvarado, 2020). This comparison led to the interpretation and compilation of information, culminating in conclusions. The information was collected from scientific articles, books on character strengths interventions, and undergraduate and graduate theses via the Google Scholar search engine.

The inclusion criteria for the selected documents included: publication within the last 5 years, a focus on adolescent or young adult student populations, and a proposed intervention protocol or detailed description of activities. The search terms in Spanish and English were *"character strengths intervention university*" or "intervención en fortalezas del carácter *universidad*."

Of the initial 3,300 documents, 8 were selected after applying the exclusion criteria. Additionally, four guidelines on the application of character strengths in educational settings were incorporated to enrich the proposal. These results are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Search Results

Results before applying the inclusion criteria	Results after applying the inclusion criteria	Additional guidelines consulted
3,300	6	4

A comparative analysis of the selected character strengths-based interventions provided key insights into the structure, content, and outcomes of existing programs. Table 2 summarizes the findings from the selected documents.

Table 2. Research findings			
Author	Intervention Focus	Duration	Key Findings
Ruiz (2020)	Generic intervention based on mindfulness and character strengths.	10 weekly sessions (50 min each).	Involvement of parents in the program; detailed activities to develop specific strengths.
Uusiautti et al. (2022)	Personalized intervention based on career decisions and character strengths.	Not described.	Presents different approaches and their results. The intervention contributed to improved life satisfaction, self-esteem, academic achievement, and the likelihood of achieving goals.
Kennes et al. (2023)	Generic intervention based on mindfulness, character strengths, and their application to various aspects of life.	8 sessions (45 min each).	Significant short-term improvements in well-being; reduction in hyperactivity and attention problems. A longer intervention is recommended to assess long-term effects.
Ebrahimi & Esmaeili (2021)	A generic intervention based on character strengths and reflections on oneself and others.	10 weekly sessions (1 hour each).	The evidence supports its effectiveness in improving well-being, resilience, and academic performance. The model demonstrates that a strengths-only approach yields positive results and is feasible.
Green (2022)	A generic intervention based on character strengths and Seligman's PERMA model.	12 sessions, 3 per week (3 hours each).	Provides a structured framework of topics, methods, and activities. The positive effects persisted six months later, highlighting its long-term impact. The most frequently reported strengths were gratitude, hope, perseverance, curiosity, and kindness.

Hierro (2022)	A personalized intervention based on mindfulness, self-compassion, and character strengths.	8 weekly sessions (3 hours each).	Supports the use of strengths-based interventions complemented by other topics. Details topics, methods, and materials. Emphasizes the importance of involving the participant's immediate environment for greater effectiveness.

3. Results

Based on a review of the selected documents, several common characteristics among the interventions were identified. Various authors agree on the effectiveness of focusing on specific character strengths as a short-term strategy (Kennes et al., 2023; Ruiz, 2020; Uusiautti et al., 2022). Furthermore, positive effects have been demonstrated not only in the short term but also in the medium term, including significant increases in well-being (Kennes et al., 2023; Uusiautti et al., 2022), reductions in symptoms related to hyperactivity, attention difficulties, and disruptive behaviors (Kennes et al., 2023), as well as improvements in participants' sense of purpose, personal achievement, and willingness to proactively tackle academic and social challenges (Uusiautti et al., 2022).

Regarding the duration of these intervention models, it was observed that most programs consist of between 8 and 12 sessions, each lasting 50 minutes to 3 hours, with some programs incorporating breaks during the longer sessions.

Although all the studies identified emphasize character strengths as a central element, some authors proposed integrating additional topics to enrich the program's content. For example, mindfulness practices were frequently combined with the development of strengths (Hierro, 2022; Kennes et al., 2023; Ruiz, 2020), while others designed interventions focused exclusively on character strengths (Ebrahimi & Esmaeili, 2021; Green, 2022; Uusiautti et al., 2022).

In terms of intervention modality, certain authors advocated for personalized approaches, designing interventions based on each participant's unique strengths, thereby making the program experience more experiential and personalized (Hierro, 2022; Kennes et al., 2023; Uusiautti et al., 2022). In contrast, others promoted a broader approach, incorporating various strengths through the six VIA virtues, regardless of whether they were part of the participants' developed repertoire of strengths (Ebrahimi & Esmaeili, 2021; Green, 2022; Ruiz, 2020). According to Ruch et al. (2020), strengths such as curiosity, gratitude, hope, love, and humor

are particularly associated with well-being and could be included generically in intervention programs.

Despite differences in the intervention modalities identified, Niemiec (2019) notes that similar results have been reported whether working with participants' specific strengths or with their weaker ones, suggesting that both approaches can be effective depending on the intervention's objectives.

Proposed Intervention

Based on these findings, a 10-week intervention model is proposed, consisting of weekly 90-minute sessions. Initially, participants will take the VIA test (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) to identify their character strengths. The activities will be grounded in mindfulness practices and tailored to focus on both the participants' specific strengths and their less-developed strengths. This structure aims to enhance the positive impacts on students' academic performance, well-being, self-esteem, and personal satisfaction. In addition, contextual factors and individual differences are taken into account in the intervention, allowing for a strengths-based approach aligned with participants' interests and needs (Arguís et al., 2012).

Likewise, the intervention incorporates cooperative learning strategies, as suggested by Arguís et al. (2012), which promote collaboration and teamwork, facilitating deeper learning and the development of key interpersonal and civic competencies. This helps create an inclusive and supportive learning environment that enhances group cohesion and engagement. Furthermore, to ensure the intervention's effectiveness, Niemiec (2019) emphasizes that it must include: the recognition and acceptance of one's own strengths; the ability to identify and appreciate strengths in others; and the application and maintenance of these strengths toward goal-setting over time in various contexts.

Objectives of the intervention

The purpose of this protocol is to provide UNIMET PMA students with complementary training on their character strengths in order to promote their well-being. The specific objectives of this protocol include: identifying and raising awareness of their own character strengths and those of their immediate environment; developing strategies for the intentional application of these strengths in their personal and professional lives; fostering the connection between mindfulness and well-being; measuring the impact of the intervention program on subjective well-being, self-esteem, and academic performance when implemented in the future; and creating a supportive community space based on shared strengths where participants feel safe and valued.

Target population

This resource is intended for university students who are part of the PMA at the Universidad Metropolitana. The following inclusion and exclusion criteria, listed in order of relevance, apply to the acceptance of any individual into the intervention model.

a) Inclusion Criteria: PMA participants interested in participating in this program who understand and sign the letter of commitment attached in Appendix B, are available to participate for the scheduled one and a half hours per week, and have completed the pre-tests.

b) Exclusion criteria: PMA students who are not available or cannot commit to the program due to work-related reasons, or who do not sign the letter of commitment or complete the pre-tests.

Content and structure of the intervention

The proposal consists of a structured 10-week protocol, with one 90-minute weekly session for groups of 10 to 12 people. The design integrates mindfulness as a cross-cutting theme and is organized into three consecutive modules:

- Preliminary Phase and Introduction
    - Before beginning, participants complete the VIA-IS inventory to identify their profile of 24 strengths (Peterson & Park, 2009).
    - Next, the program guidelines are established, and mindfulness practices are introduced. This tool is used in all sessions to improve students' emotional self-regulation and focus.
- Module II: Identification and Individual Strengths
    - The program focuses on the five highest-scoring strengths for this module—that is, their unique strengths.
    - The goal is for students to use their dominant strengths in new ways to address their current academic challenges.
    - This module includes experiential activities and mutual recognition exercises.
- Module III: Lower-Scoring Strengths and Closing
    - Work on the four lowest-scoring strengths on the VIA-IS.

- Participants are taught to use their unique strengths to support the development of these areas of opportunity (Niemiec, 2019).
- Finally, the principles for habit formation are established based on the PERMA model and the setting of long-term academic goals.

- Post-intervention follow-up
  - To ensure the sustainability of the results, the protocol establishes a follow-up schedule for the 3 months following completion: at the end of the intervention, 6 weeks after completion, and 12 weeks later.

Table 3 summarizes the main activities and tasks for each session, along with the resources allocated to each.

Table 3. Overview of activities and sessions.

Module	Session	Objectives	Content and Activities	Resources
I	1	Introduction to the model, mindfulness practice, and group agreements.	- Program Structure. - Presentation activities. - Group guidelines (confidentiality, respect). - Introduction to mindfulness; mindful breathing exercise. - Assignment: Daily breathing practice and journaling.	Slides, printed rules, journal template.
	2	Delve deeper into character strengths according to the VIA classification.	- Review of the 6 virtues and 24 strengths. - Identifying strengths in oneself and others. - Memory game with strength cards. - Assignment: Recognize the expression of your strengths on a daily basis.	Slides, strength cards, participant's journal.

II	3	Understand virtuosity and its relationship to strengths.	- Practice strengths using the "suggestion bowl." - Blindness to the conscious recognition of strengths. - Learning to strike a balance between strengths and weaknesses. - Assignment: Identify overused strengths and practice finding balance.	Slides, strength cards, video, journal.
	4	Understanding individual strengths and positive emotions.	- - Recognizing strengths through role-playing. - Theory of Positive Emotions (Fredrickson, 2009). - Relationship between positive emotions and specific strengths. - Assignment: Identify which emotions are linked to your strengths.	Slides, strength cards, video, journal.
	5	Understanding how personality mediates specific strengths.	- Exercise in judgment and creativity. - The influence of personality traits on strengths (Glazov, 2007). - Charades game to practice previous content. - Assignment: Identify family members' "brain colors."	Slides, charades cards, video, journal, Brain Colors Test.

III	6	Understand and identify the " " (least-used) strengths.	- Review and discussion of previous content. - Recognition of one's lesser strengths. - Understanding lesser strengths according to Niemiec (2019). - Assignment: Practice your lesser strengths daily.	Slides, strength cards, video, journal.
	7	Building habits to enhance your lesser strengths.	- Practicing loving-kindness meditation. - Planning the step-by-step implementation of a lesser strength. - Principles of habit formation (Clear, 2020). - Assignment: Follow the step-by-step plan for a lesser strength.	Slides, strength cards, video, journal.
	8	Understand the role of personality in relation to weaker strengths.	- Awareness of the areas of life where certain strengths apply. - "Shadow" aspects of the Brain Colors (Glazov, 2007). - Assignment: Identify strengths in people you don't like.	Slides, strength cards, video, journal.
	9	Relationship between the PERMA model and character strengths.	- Appreciate the benefits of not having practiced minor strengths previously. - Commitment to implementing these strengths in the future. - The PERMA model and character strengths. - Assignment: Identify strengths in your family members.	Slides, strength cards, video, journal.
IV	10	Envision the future and develop an action plan.	- Future Strengths Profile. - Group reflection on the program. - Final assessment (post-testing).	Slides, strengths cards, journal, assessment tools.

Required resources

The following materials are required to implement the program: a digital or printed reflection journal, where participants will record their experiences, reflections, and assigned tasks throughout the program; character strengths cards: containing ideas and suggestions for developing and applying each of the 24 strengths; presentation guide: a support resource for leading activities and reflections, designed to be projected on a screen during sessions; and physical space: a classroom with sufficient capacity to facilitate smooth interaction among participants.

To assess participants' progress before and after the intervention, the following validated scales are recommended:

- Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale: Developed in 1965, this scale explores an individual's feelings of self-satisfaction. It consists of 10 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale. This instrument has demonstrated good reliability ($\alpha = 0.79$; CFI = 0.97; TLI = 0.95; RMSEA = 0.04; and SRMR = 0.02) (Hyland et al., 2014).
- Palenzuela Academic Self-Efficacy Scale: Developed in 1983, this unidimensional scale assesses students' perception of personal efficacy in academic contexts. It consists of 7 items on a 5-point Likert scale and yields good reliability results ($\alpha = 0.88$; $\chi^2/df = 3.43$, CFI = 0.99, TLI = 0.99, SRMR = 0.04, RMSEA = 0.07) (García-Álvarez et al., 2024).
- Ryff Psychological Well-Being Scale: Developed in 1989, it measures well-being through six subdimensions, with a total of 39 items rated on a 4-point Likert scale. In this study, it demonstrated good internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.86$) (Barrera-Hernández et al., 2019).

Feasibility analysis

Based on this intervention, a reduction in risky behaviors and a decrease in the likelihood of developing psychological difficulties are anticipated (Lavy, 2020). Additionally, the program could foster a greater sense of belonging among participants toward UNIMET, ultimately strengthening the institution's reputation by demonstrating its commitment not only to academic excellence but also to student well-being. This would enable the university to offer comprehensive support to its entire student community, particularly those at academic risk.

As for the costs associated with implementing the program, they are projected based on the use of facilities, which for individuals outside the university cost $275 per day for a space accommodating up to 40 people (E. De Lima [Events Department], personal communication, January 13, 2025), the facilitator's cost, which in this case falls within the scope of the duties for

which they are contracted by UNIMET, but could involve professional fees of $30 per academic hour (Capital District College of Psychologists, 2025), resulting in a total cost of $3,350.

In terms of benefits, this intervention program is expected to generate multiple positive outcomes beyond those outlined above, such as the promotion of civic and prosocial behaviors, improved academic performance, and the strengthening of participants' socio-emotional functioning. Therefore, given the ease of implementation, the potential cost savings through the use of digital tools and classroom technologies, and the availability of qualified human resources, the proposed intervention is a feasible project. Its implementation could position UNIMET as a leader in positive education within the country.

4. Conclusion

The objective of this study was to design a feasible intervention proposal, based on character strengths, for students enrolled in the Academic Improvement Program (PMA) at the Metropolitan University. Grounded in Positive Psychology, particularly Seligman's PERMA model and Peterson and Seligman's (2004) classification of the 24 strengths, the program was structured into three modules: mindfulness practice, development of specific strengths, and cultivation of underutilized strengths.

A comparative analysis of previous interventions demonstrated that strengths-based programs have consistently positive effects on well-being, self-esteem, emotional regulation, prosocial behavior, and academic performance. These effects are observed in both the short and medium term, especially when interventions include experiential activities, assigned tasks, and group reflection.

The proposed intervention, which lasts 10 weeks, includes weekly 90-minute sessions that combine theoretical instruction, interactive group work, and reflective exercises. The program emphasizes personalized approaches, cooperative learning, and the integration of mindfulness to enhance emotional awareness and the application of strengths. Furthermore, the feasibility analysis demonstrated that the program is cost-effective, contextually appropriate, and logistically viable within the university setting.

Overall, this project supports the idea that interventions focused on character strengths can serve as an effective standalone strategy. When implemented faithfully, such programs can contribute significantly to student well-being, resilience, and academic success, particularly among at-risk populations such as those in the PMA.

5. Recommendations

It is recommended that the proposed intervention be tested with a sample group from the Academic Improvement Program (PMA) to evaluate its effectiveness and adaptability in the real world. It is crucial to gather feedback from both participants and facilitators to refine the content and delivery methods. Given the low resource requirements and high potential impact, the program could be integrated into the University Metropolitana's overall academic support framework, contributing to a holistic approach to student development.

Future studies should include pre- and post-intervention assessments using validated tools. Additionally, a six-month follow-up should be conducted to evaluate long-term effects.

Furthermore, adequate training of facilitators in Positive Psychology and strengths-based methodologies is essential to ensure fidelity in implementation and maximize outcomes. As some authors note, encouraging the participation of peers, faculty, and family members can enhance the generalization of learned skills beyond the intervention sessions and promote a culture of well-being within the institution.

Future research should explore the differential effects of focusing on particular strengths versus weaker strengths, as well as the role of specific strengths (e.g., gratitude, perseverance, hope) in improving academic and psychological outcomes.

It is recommended that studies conduct implementation trials and predictive validity studies of the intervention, either by directly correlating variables such as academic performance or by measuring the duration of underperformance following the conclusion of the intervention.

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