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UNH Researcher Investigates Character Development with $1.1 Million Templeton Grant
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DURHAM, N.H. – A University of New Hampshire professor is among a group of researchers who will conduct a comprehensive evaluation of the worldwide essay contest the Laws of Life Essay Contest to determine if the project, sponsored by the Templeton Foundation, has a lasting impact on participants.

Victoria Banyard, professor of psychology, will join researchers at Sewanee University and Marquette University to conduct the study, which has been funded by a more than $1.1 million grant from the John Templeton Foundation to Sewanee University.

“We know from past research that narratives about our lives are a component of well-being and also of changing our behavior in positive ways. We know that even relatively brief interventions that involve writing and narrative can have a positive impact on mood, health, and behavior. This study is an opportunity to investigate how a narrative exercise presented at a key moment in the lifespan, the transition from adolescence to adulthood, may act in conjunction with other positive coping factors to promote positive development,” Banyard said.

Now celebrating its 25th anniversary, the Laws of Life Essay Contest involves more than 100,000 students from around the world each year. It is one of several Templeton Foundation projects to promote moral character development. The Laws of Life are principles such as the Golden Rule or "honesty is the best policy." Students choose the Law of Life that has been most important to them and write an essay on how it has touched their lives. The contest originated in Franklin County, Tenn., the home of Sir John Templeton.

The research project will be the first-ever scientific evaluation of the essay contest. Considerable research on other types of expressive writing and journaling programs indicates that these writing experiences can have long-lasting positive effects.

The researchers -- Banyard; principal investigator Sherry Hamby, research associate at the UNH Crimes against Children Research Center and research associate professor of psychology at Sewanee, the University of the South; and John Grych, associate professor of psychology at Marquette University -- will talk with people of all ages who have participated in the Laws of Life Essay Contest, as well as with a comparison group of people who did not participate. The study might include as many as 3,000 people from Franklin County and surrounding Tennessee counties.

The researchers will assess a wide range of possible outcomes to provide a comprehensive assessment of the effects of writing the essay and how expressive writing on the Laws of Life might help people as they experience challenges in life.
The University of New Hampshire, founded in 1866, is a world-class public research university with the feel of a New England liberal arts college. A land, sea, and space-grant university, UNH is the state's flagship public institution, enrolling 12,200 undergraduate and 2,300 graduate students.

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