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Christopher Soto Sees Personality Change: How We Think, Feel, Behave

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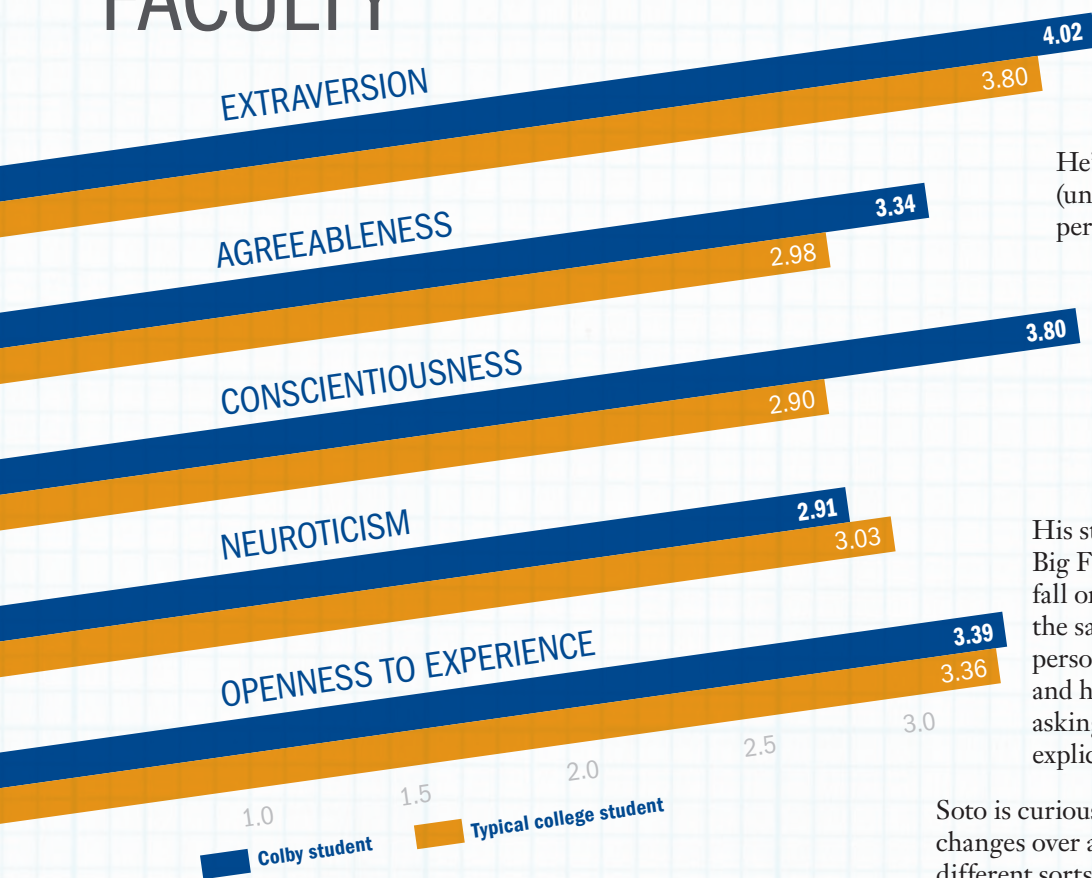
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FACULTY



How We Think, Feel, Behave

Christopher Soto studies how personality is formed—and can change

Assistant Professor of Psychology Christopher Soto has good news and bad news.

The bad news: “Most kids become less agreeable and less conscientious from about age ten to about age fourteen.”

The good news? “Then they turn things around. They get much nicer and more responsible over the course of high school and college years, and then you see these more gradual positive changes that continue through adulthood.”

What is the Colby personality? A study by students of Assistant Professor of Psychology Christopher Soto showed that Colby students are above average in extraversion, agreeableness, and conscientiousness and below average in neuroticism. (See graphic above. Data come from a study conducted by Natasha Atkinson '11, Jessica Blais '12, and Julia Engelsted '11 and presented at the 2012 meeting of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology.)

Soto’s conclusions are based on more than personal observation (though he did once teach middle school math). He’s spent his academic career—Harvard (undergraduate), Berkeley, Colby—studying personality: how it is formed, how it changes with age, how it shapes the course of a person’s life.

Like many psychologists, Soto considers personality through assessment of “the Big Five” personality traits—openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.

His students do the same, learning about the Big Five and considering where they themselves fall on the personality scale. Anyone can do the same on Soto’s personality-test website—personalitylab.org—adding to the data that Soto and his students use in ongoing studies. “It’s asking you to reflect on your behavior in a very explicit way,” he said.

Soto is curious to know more about how personality changes over a person’s lifetime, and why people see different sorts of changes. Behavioral genetics, he said, tells us that personality is formed by genes and the brain and also by environment. Genetic similarities predict similar personalities, and yet even identical twins don’t have identical personalities.

Experts are beginning to conclude that personality can also be changed intentionally, though wishing for a certain change doesn’t make it happen. “It’s translating these abstract traits into specific behaviors and specific plans for implementation,” Soto said. Act differently long enough and personality can actually be altered, he says. “If you can continue behaving in the new way long enough ... that becomes your automatic response,” Soto said.

“Genetic similarities predict similar personalities, and yet even identical twins don’t have identical personalities.”

—Christopher Soto

Another trained behavior, he said, is the tendency to consider other people in terms of their personality traits. “I warn my students,” he said. “You will not be able to turn it off.” —Gerry Boyle '78