



# Building Community Well-Being in Higher Education: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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There is greater recognition that well-being is of increasing importance and concern to students in higher education. College and university students are not merely seeking successful careers and positive financial outcomes. Across multiple countries, students in higher education rate the importance of well-being higher than money (Diener, 2000). They desire to live a flourishing life beyond simply gaining material provisions and finding successful careers.

Despite this desire, stressors abound for students. There are multiple social, academic, and identity challenges at this developmental stage. Environmentally, stress abounds with the vicissitudes of economic uncertainty, social division and unrest, inequalities, and technologically-fostered pressures and isolation. According to the American College Health Association, a substantial proportion of students have experienced depression (41%) and overwhelming anxiety (62%) (American College Health Association, 2018). The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated these trends leading to lower well-being across multiple indicators (Copeland et al., 2021).

This concern of well-being widens to faculty and staff who seek to support and serve students. In different world regions, academic personnel also have challenges to their well-being, as seen from large-scale surveys (Catano et al., 2010; Winefield et al., 2003), especially with growing work demands, lack of work-life balance, and decreased work security. The well-being of academic personnel is critically important in itself, but from a systems perspective, we need to recognize that there are also inextricable interplays with student well-being. This can be observed in the role of academic personnel in modeling health and wellness to students and their (in)ability to support students should their own well-being be compromised. While these different groups are distinct, the well-being among these groups is highly interwoven.

With this backdrop, the well-being of the entire community in higher education has been brought into greater urgency and sharper focus. But, what is “community” well-being? The term “community” is explicitly included to recognize

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multiple subpopulations, groups, identities, and affiliations within higher education. It implies an emphasis on not only one demographic group or one segment of the population. Instead, the expectation is that well-being should be considered from the perspective of different groups and interests. It does not imply that every project should attempt to include every possible perspective or sample every grouping, given the natural limitations of time and resources. However, programmatic work on community well-being will be conscientiously inclusive and consider multiple subpopulations and their perspectives. Moreover, because of the social and interconnected nature of well-being, “community” requires us to move beyond an individual accounting of well-being to understand the dyadic relationships, connections, network characteristics, and (un)shared perceptions of the community. Research efforts, methodologies, and perspectives have to go beyond an individual level of analysis.

Within psychological research, there are two senses of the term well-being. The first being the specific constructs that we study, such as subjective well-being (Diener, 1984) or psychological well-being (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). However, a broader sense of the term well-being includes these constructs but emphasizes “optimal functioning” or “flourishing” in life (Gable & Haidt, 2005). It is with this broader meaning of well-being that community well-being in higher education is envisioned, with several implications. First, this integrative meaning of well-being means that we go beyond the negative (e.g., stress, illness) and the amelioratory (e.g., prevention) to the positive (e.g., purpose, happiness) and constructive (e.g., promotion) (Pawelski, 2016a, b). Moreover, it is not merely concerned about the academic domain, but multiple life domains (e.g., relationships, finances, health) (e.g., Sirgy et al., 2009) as these domains of life are equally important and closely connected for a flourishing life. Second, optimal functioning involves not merely “feeling good” but “doing good,” and determining the ways toward positive action. In other words, well-being is not mere pleasure – there are times when seeking positive experiences needs to be curbed to perform a good. In a more mundane example, this could entail giving up the immediate pleasure of watching TV and eating donuts in favor of exerting effort in physical exercise. Moreover, laudatory actions often require a substantial amount of personal sacrifice. In this conception, well-being or flourishing includes positive character, skills, abilities, and the development of such (see also Tay et al., 2018). Finally, well-being does not imply the absence of personal and environmental challenges. Nevertheless, from a systems perspective, one should be careful of possible systemic challenges and inequities that disproportionately affect one group in the higher education community.

Many researchers and institutional stakeholders desire not only to better understand the factors that negatively impact community well-being but also to address this growing problem through increasing awareness, adding resources, developing interventions, and creating programs. While there has been a surge of research, resources, and programs, much of this has been conducted in a siloed manner, speaking to specific audiences and disciplines. This has limited our ability to learn from one another collectively on how to promote community well-being in higher education. Speaking from my own experience as a co-editor of the *Handbook of Well-Being* (Diener et al., 2018), having published multiple papers on this topic, and having provided consulting to multiple higher education institutions on promoting

well-being, I have found that research advances on understanding and promoting well-being have often not been adequately communicated to stakeholders and leaders in this space.

This special issue on “Building Community Well-Being in Higher Education” serves as a way to bring together new empirical research and perspectives in this space. Communicating these ideas across multiple disciplines and multiple stakeholders can serve to cross-fertilize, consolidate, and enhance our efforts to understand and promote well-being in colleges and universities. Another aim is to showcase well-being programs that are grounded in empirical research. These are incredibly helpful and instructive because even though well-being programs have language, concepts, and delivery modes tailored to the institution’s culture and needs, there are generalizable processes and ideas that can be gleaned.

## Synopses of Articles

### Understanding Community Well-Being

The first set of articles focus on the empirical research that deepens our understanding of community well-being and its predictors (Williams et al.; Becarra et al.; Weeks et al.; Perkins et al.). The paper by Williams et al. proposed that growth mindset may serve as a lens that shapes how individuals interpret others’ mindsets, which can have consequences for well-being. They used data from a total of 3,000 undergraduate students in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) programs and found that growth mindsets predicted perceptions of peer and instructor growth mindsets that lead to a sense of trust and belonging at school. The implication is that fostering growth mindsets in students may play not only a buffering role against stressors but may help students perceive their environments in a more positive manner to foster trust and belonging.

The paper by Becerra et al. examines the role of advisor-advisee relationships and their relation to psychological and physical well-being among graduate students. In a sample of 446 Ph.D. students across the United States, they found that a positive advisor-advisee relationship was related to higher positive affect and less negative affect. It was also related to greater sleep efficiency (i.e., the ratio of time spent sleeping to time spent in bed) and less frequent visits to the healthcare clinic for mental and/or health concerns. However, they were slightly less likely to self-report better health. Overall, this study suggests that a positive advisor-advisee relationship is linked to the well-being of graduate students. This is consistent with the broader organizational literature where supportive supervisors are important for well-being (Paterson et al., 2014).

Well-being does not mean the absence of challenges but the ability to work through stressors in life. Along these lines, Weeks et al. study the concept of resilience conceptualized as the “maintenance or recovery of adaptive functioning after a challenging or stressful event.” Using a longitudinal sample of 953 college undergraduates from four different institutions, they found that students who experienced “high-impact” stressors had increased depressive symptoms but showed recovery

over time. Critically, students who had greater self-compassion had lesser stress response and recovery over time, demonstrating a link between self-compassion and resilience. This finding suggests that programs aimed at raising self-compassion may improve student resilience and their ability to work through college stressors.

Because community well-being emphasizes different perspectives, it recognizes that not every member within a community, even in the same demographic group, experiences similar forms and levels of well-being. To better understand this phenomenon, Perkins et al. used a latent profile approach to uncover latent groups of individuals who had different well-being profiles (i.e., wellness and stress) from 2,672 U.S. engineering undergraduate students across 17 universities. They found distinct latent profiles implying that student experiences are not uniform. An implication is that both research methodologies and programs aimed at understanding and enhancing well-being will need to incorporate the diversity of experiences and not assume that demographic groups adequately classify experiences.

### **Well-Being Interventions**

As colleges and universities implement programs to enhance well-being, it is vital to determine whether interventions apply within classroom and college settings. This effort goes beyond the evaluation of an intervention. It contributes to implementation science, where the goal is to reduce the gap between research and practice (King et al., 2019) and to effectively understand the nuances of implementing an intervention within specific constraints and contexts. To this end, Duan et al. examined the effectiveness of the Best Possible Self intervention in an undergraduate classroom as part of the course assignment. They found that the intervention did not significantly improve well-being in the intervention group compared to the control group; instead, the control group had better well-being. This study was conducted in the context of COVID-19 with increased demands, stressors, and environmental changes that students had to navigate and suggests that additional burdens of interventions implemented as course assignments may limit or even worsen the use of established interventions.

Another study by Dreer explored the impact of enhancing student–teacher well-being as part of a course that had a series of audio podcasts teaching three positive psychology interventions – gratitude, kindness, and savoring. The quasi-experiment found that the intervention had small but significant positive effects on general well-being (i.e., life satisfaction and happiness) but not job-related well-being (i.e., job satisfaction and engagement). This work suggests that interventions may be in some cases efficiently implemented through audio podcasts. Further, there may be differential effects of interventions on the different aspects of well-being.

### **Program Development and Implementation**

Beyond interventions, the next set of articles discuss how colleges and universities have developed ways to enhance community well-being programmatically (Barker et al.; McCuskey and Zhang; Hoyle et al.). These can serve as models and exemplars

for institutions seeking to build community well-being on their campuses. The article by Barker et al. discusses the steps taken to establish the University of Wisconsin-Superior's Pruitt Center for Mindfulness and Well-Being. They discuss the process of obtaining the resources for the center and the positive impact it has had. They also presented their conceptual model of well-being that integrates current models from positive psychology and the Universidad Tecmilenio Well-being in Happiness Ecosystem. Each dimension of the model is well-grounded in research, and they have sought to create activities that foster growth specific to each dimension.

McCuskey and Zhang introduce the Steps to Leaps initiative developed in 2019 at Purdue University to promote campus well-being by providing the relevant tools and resources to build skills and habits that foster student success. This effort drew on multiple perspectives and stakeholders – students, staff, and faculty – to conceptualize, develop, and implement. The Steps to Leaps conceptual model centers around five pillars on which programming, research, and assessment developed: well-being, leadership and professional development, impact, networks, and grit. They discuss the lessons learned over the past years and present considerations for replicating such efforts on other campuses.

Hoyle et al. present the Student Resilience and Well-Being Project (SRWBP), a collaborative project among four private higher education institutions funded by a private foundation. They describe the partnership among academic and student affairs professionals with research-active faculty members in creating an evidence-based approach to policies and programs that promote student well-being. A significant component of the SRWBP involved longitudinal data collection in developing and evaluating resilience and well-being programs. They describe the process of coordinating efforts from multiple stakeholders and multiple institutions and share the key lessons learned that could help other similar collaborative projects or initiatives.

## Conclusion

While the concern over community well-being on campuses worldwide is heightening, it is heartening to see an increase in research and programming around enhancing community well-being in higher education. These papers reflect the breadth and depth of ongoing interest and collaborative efforts in enhancing well-being – both within and outside academia.

Nevertheless, the research, perspectives, and initiatives presented here are by no means exhaustive and only represent the tip of the broader ongoing work. I hope that this special issue serves as both a milestone for what has been done but also a catalyst for future research on the topic of community well-being in higher education.

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