

Expanding Understandings of Well-Being in Higher Education Settings

Topic/Issue

Over the past decade, postsecondary practitioners and leaders have asserted growing concern over the well-being of their students. Many institutions have launched efforts to foster student well-being, underlining its value to student learning, persistence, and holistic development. Yet rates of student depression and negative mental health continue to persist. At-promise students—students from low income and/or historically or currently marginalized backgrounds¹—often face additional systemic barriers—such as racism and classism—that further affect their well-being. When considering how to support student well-being in higher education settings, we are interested in approaches that move beyond a sole focus on individuals to ones that recognize the social, institutional, and ecological factors shaping student experiences—an orientation that can extend to staff and faculty as well. After outlining four principles that inform our thinking, this brief summarizes several of the articles our team has published on varied facets of well-being and offers recommendations for practice.

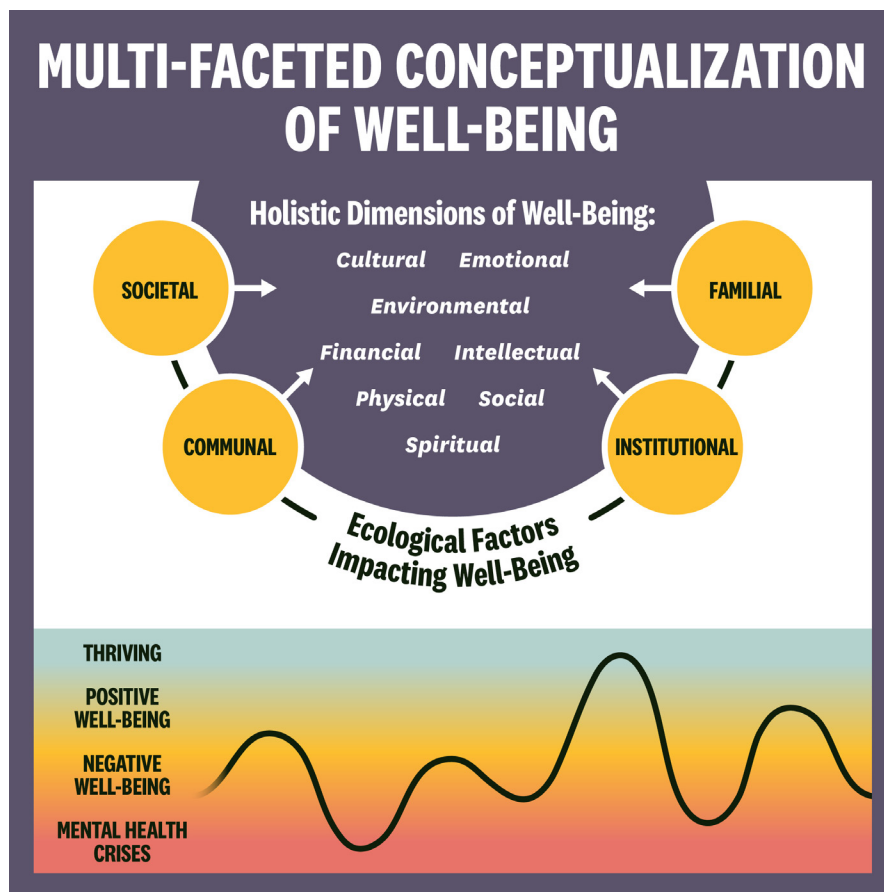
This practitioner brief is intended to highlight the importance of well-being for student success in higher education—and to explain how we have approached understanding well-being in multi-faceted ways.

When exploring well-being, we are guided by four interrelated principles:

- **Well-being is complex and varied.** Well-being involves multiple dimensions such as (but not limited to): cultural, emotional, environmental, financial, intellectual, physical, spiritual, and social. A multi-faceted understanding of well-being moves beyond a mental health orientation to considering student well-being experiences holistically.²
- **Ecological factors impact well-being.** Postsecondary students experience well-being in institutional, societal, familial, and communal contexts. Students' well-being is often influenced—positively and negatively—by social experiences and relationships. University ecologies—including programs, policies, and practices—have the potential to support (or hinder) student well-being.
- **Well-being is dynamic.** Most students experience well-being (or lack thereof) differently over time, with ebbs and flows of (un)wellness transpiring on a given day or over the course of a week, semester, or school year. These fluctuations are natural and often serve as a catalyst to growth. Thus, it is important to understand and support students' well-being throughout their college experience, rather than thinking well-being has been officially “achieved” at any point.
- **States of well-being can vary significantly.** Any student can experience a spectrum of well-being, ranging from health crises to thriving. Programs are encouraged to foster and acknowledge moments of growth and opportunity as well as recognize when interventions are needed.

¹ Bettencourt et al., 2023a

² World Health Organization, 2021



Definition

Well-being has been defined in many different ways across disciplines and time. In 2020, twenty higher education associations created an inter-association definition of well-being applicable to higher education contexts that acknowledges two interdependent types of well-being: individual and community. According to these associations, well-being is:

An optimal and dynamic state that allows people to achieve their full potential...Individual well-being is defined within three broad and interrelated categories: (a) the perceived assessment of one's own life as Well-being has been defined in many different ways across disciplines and time. In 2020, twenty higher education associations created an inter-association definition of well-being applicable to higher education contexts that acknowledges two interdependent types of well-being: individual and community. According to these associations, well-being is: being generally happy and satisfying, (b) having one's human rights and needs met, and (c) one's contribution to the community. Community well-being is defined by relationships and connectedness, perceived quality of life for all people in the community, and how well the community meets the needs of all members. By focusing on the whole—the whole person, the whole educational experience, the whole institution, the whole community—well-being becomes a multifaceted goal and a shared responsibility for the entire institution.³

Our understanding of well-being is further informed by critical approaches to well-being that acknowledge historical, social, and political factors that impact students' well-being rather than solely focusing on individual factors as the source of well-being.^{4,5}

³ NIRSA, NASPA, & ACHA, 2020

⁴ Howard et al., 2019

⁵ Wicker, 2024

Key Takeaways and Accompanying Recommendations

The PASS project has explored well-being through multiple methods (i.e. pre/post-tests, interval surveys, longitudinal student interviews, interviews with practitioners). Below we highlight key takeaways from varied analyses (please see related full-length [articles](#) and practice [briefs](#)).

- **How students spend their time affects well-being.** Academic activities, employment, and socializing significantly affect students' well-being. Navigating and prioritizing competing time demands in college—such as attending class, employment, studying, and doing homework—can lead to stress and negatively influence at-promise students' well-being,^{6,7} likely because at-promise students often navigate multiple responsibilities and time commitments related to income status. Time to socialize and relax, on the other hand, appear to support at-promise students' well-being.
- We offer a re-framing of how we think about students' "time management skills" which moves away from a deficit orientation. Traditional time management strategies place responsibility on students to control their time to a degree that many low-income students do not have the luxury to do because they tend to carry responsibilities outside of the classroom that impact the time they have to spend on university-based activities.⁸ Additionally, we learned that college educators, counselors, and student support program practitioners often serve as critical guides who help students navigate their time, structure their routines, and engage in reflection and meaning-making around well-being; students without this type of support often struggled to navigate their time commitments.⁹

Recommendations:

- Establish a university culture where faculty and practitioners consistently recognize and validate students' hard work and draw connections to holistic wellness.
- Consider that how students spend their time is not simply a freely chosen process, especially for low-income students juggling responsibilities in addition to attending higher education. Notably, non-academic activities, such as socializing, have positive implications for student well-being.
- Acknowledge that it is normal for students to experience challenges navigating multiple competing time commitments while they adjust to college and provide time for students to reflect how they are navigating time demands. Doing so normalizes the difficult nature of this process so that students do not internalize their challenges as limitations on their time management capabilities, which would detract from their well-being.
- Strategize about how educators and practitioners can reduce strain on students' time, such as through streamlining or removing bureaucratic hurdles.
- Provide support services to foster well-being at critical points of the semester, like finals week. Increase access to well-being programs and resources throughout the year.
- Encourage students to challenge themselves academically while also engaging in activities that support their well-being.

⁶ Bowman et al., 2025

⁷ Kitchen et al., 2024

⁸ Bettencourt et al., 2025

⁹ Kitchen et al., 2024

- **Financial well-being is a key component of overall well-being.** In examining how low-income students experience financial well-being, the primary financial stressor mentioned was the cost of attending university, even for students with scholarships. Additional costs such as room and board (or other housing), food, activities, and transportation often proved challenging. Across most interviews, students prized their financial resilience. Most frequently, students associated self-support through employment, whether on campus via work-study jobs, or off-campus, with the intention of eliminating financial pressure on themselves and their families. Students shared ample examples of how financial skills and strategies learned from their family and/or home communities aided them in developing their financial well-being.¹⁰
- Institutional barriers to students' financial well-being included limited access to staff and faculty who could provide ongoing support (e.g., too few institutional agents to support financial well-being or restricted appointment availability); institutional agents who dismissed or invalidated student experiences; and services or policies that were confusing, incomplete, or inadequate. In addition, students often lacked knowledge of policies, which caused them to miss opportunities for services or deadlines. Receiving effective support in navigating financial aid enhanced students' financial well-being.¹¹

Recommendations:

- Fund scholarships and provide financial support when possible. Financial aid is integral to low-income students' ability to attend college and mitigates financial stressors which can hinder student success and financial well-being.
- Improve the services and resources available to help students navigate complex financial systems and requirements. While we acknowledge the difficult landscape universities are facing in terms of providing financial aid, we found that students are particularly challenged by administrative tasks associated with receiving and maintaining financial aid that negatively impact well-being. Therefore, guidance throughout the aid and scholarship process can be beneficial in reducing students' stress.
- Provide opportunities for students to reflect on the financial skills and strategies they learned from home or community and/or through working—and illustrate connections to skills and strategies conducive to navigating their postsecondary education and career.
- **Immigrant and refugee students highlighted the role of family and culture in how they experienced well-being.** Familial connection emerged as a key source of student support for immigrant and refugee students—akin to what we have documented for low-income students more broadly. Qualitative analyses show that first- and second-generation immigrant and refugee students' familial and cultural contexts influenced how they perceived and practiced well-being. Family both served as an essential source of emotional and academic well-being while students attended school and at times could also serve as a barrier to agency over students' time, resources, and energy, thus affecting their well-being.¹²

Recommendations:

- Acknowledge the role of family throughout students' academic journeys. Student services programs—such as orientation, student life, and career services—are well-suited to consider how they might include families as an extension of student support.
- Consider 'family' beyond just nuclear to include extended or chosen family.
- Inquire about families as a means to connect with and support students as they adjust to college.

¹⁰ Lauderdale et al., under review

¹¹ Lauderdale et al., under review

¹² Kim et al., 2025

- **Practitioners have meaningful insights to share about nurturing community care.** While many student affairs practitioners passionately support students, this may come at the cost of their own well-being and lead to stress and fatigue. In the same way that it is important for institutions to create spaces that support student well-being, institutions have the responsibility to support practitioners. We found that the kind of work, position of the program at the institution, and high rates of staff transition created challenges for practitioners. However, their compassion fatigue was buffered by a culture of care and mentorship within the program.¹³ We also describe how the flexibility of “job crafting” allowed practitioners to adjust their work hours and practices in response to the demands on their time—often unpredictable due to the ever-changing landscape of student needs and institutional and societal policies.¹⁴

Recommendations:

- Build a strong culture of care that offers support, resources, and guidance when practitioners are faced with difficult situations.
- Program leaders can be particularly important for shaping a culture of care and for modeling self-care.
- Integrate job crafting into supervisory practices by carving out time during evaluations or team meetings for educators and practitioners to reflect on how they adjust tasks to balance organizational goals and personal well-being.
- Establish clear metrics that account for job crafting in order to help identify sustainable improvements to work conditions and outcomes.
- Engage colleagues as thought partners in addressing work challenges, document instances of task crafting, and communicate adjustments to supervisors.

Questions to Guide Practice

1. What are your students’ biggest well-being challenges? What university structure or policy plays a role in hindering well-being?
2. Is there an approach or program element that is particularly effective in supporting student well-being?
3. What opportunities exist to discuss and strategize about meaningful well-being approaches and practices with other colleagues in your unit? Across campus?
4. How are we—as practitioners and faculty—practicing community care? What barriers exist to our collective well-being? What practices or approaches have been helpful in cultivating community well-being? What new approaches might we pilot to nurture community care?
5. How do you incorporate self-care into your professional practice? What institutional practices/policies could shift to enhance your well-being?

Suggested Citation: Todorova, R., & Corwin, Z. B. (2025). *Expanding Understandings of Well-Being in Higher Education Settings* [Brief]. Pullias Center for Higher Education, University of Southern California.

¹³ Perez & Bettencourt, 2023

¹⁴ Bettencourt et al., 2023b

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