Inter-association Well-being Definition

MAY 2020

Health and Well-being in Higher Education: *A Commitment to Student Success* commits to innovating, supporting, and fostering a holistic, integrated, and strategic approach to well-being from the association level to the institutional level. In our pursuit to co-create cultures of integrated well-being on campuses worldwide, we want to ensure we are building from a shared understanding and foundation. Since there was not an existing definition that defined well-being, especially as it applies to higher education, the members of our organizations asked that one be created.

To this end, we have worked together — as a community of experts from across our respective fields — to review the many existing well-being theories and to adapt those theories and language into an overarching definition of well-being for higher education. This definition, and its supplementary material, is meant to be foundational; we hope a shared understanding can be a stepping stone to systemic change. This document is, of course, not exhaustive, and it does not intend to mean all things to all organizations or specialty areas; rather, the goal is to be widely usable. Our definition is tailored to inform programming, policies, and practices in support of student well-being in higher education settings.

Simple definition

We define well-being as an optimal and dynamic state that allows people to achieve their full potential.

Expanded definition

We define well-being as an optimal and dynamic state that allows people to achieve their full potential. Our focus is on two interdependent types of well-being: 1) individual and 2) community. **Individual well-being** is defined by three interrelated components – subjective well-being, objective well-being, and civic well-being. **Community well-being** is defined by the systems and norms of an environment that contribute to an equitable infrastructure of opportunities, access, resources, conditions, and other socio-ecological supports that make it possible for all individuals to achieve their full potential. 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 campus.

Individual well-being

Individual well-being is defined by three interrelated components – subjective well-being, objective well-being, and civic well-being.

1. **Subjective well-being** is expressed when people feel good and think their lives are good; they would rank themselves high on measures of happiness and life satisfaction. The affective (e.g., feeling good) and cognitive (e.g., thinking life is good) aspects of subjective well-being can move independently from one another.

2. **Objective well-being** is realized when people have their basic human rights and needs met; this includes secure sources of food and housing, access to mental and physical care, and the right to life, liberty and security of person regardless of differences across individual identities.

3. **Civic well-being** is demonstrated by acting on community-supportive values and contributing to the communities in which they live. These communities may include campus, local, state, national, and global communities. Recognizing their own value and impact on the whole community, individuals reject biased and prejudicial beliefs, and they actively participate in at least one behavior that benefits others. In other words, they act in support of the subjective and objective wellbeing of others, rather than detracting from it.

Community well-being

Community well-being is defined by the systems and norms of an environment that contribute to an equitable infrastructure of opportunities, resources, conditions, and other socio-ecological supports that make it possible for all individuals to achieve their full potential. Individuals striving for well-being need communities of well-being to engage fully in this pursuit.

Furthermore, intentionally creating a community environment that supports well-being creates opportunities for the well-being of everyone in the community to be improved. It's also important to recognize that colleges and college students are embedded in a society and the structure of that society has a profound influence on their well-being.

This definition is drawn from established frameworks/research/measures of wellbeing, including: Brief Inventory of Thriving, Flourishing Scale, Okanagan Charter, Gallup-Purdue Index, Robert Wood Johnson Community Well-Being, World Health Organization, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Wake Forest University Well-Being Assessment, and others.

Table 1. Definitional and Contributing Factors by Individual Well-Being Component

	Definitional Factors	Contributing Factors: What are the necessary skills, resources, and conditions?
Subjective	Feeling happy Life satisfaction Self-esteem Feeling hopeful/content Feeling calm/at peace	Optimism Appropriate/healthy skepticism Meaning Purpose Belonging Engagement Social support networks Achievement Mastery Healthy coping skills Supportive campus norms, policies, and spaces Faculty and staff who design curriculum and programs with these factors in mind Faculty and staff who model these factors
Objective	Enough money Being safe Being respected Being free from discrimination Access to secure sources of food, housing, and health care Physical health	Sufficient resources on campus Supportive policies Supportive campus norms Available helping relationships
Civic	Valuing doing good for others Valuing political engagement Valuing humanitarian rights Valuing volunteering Being connected to others regardless of identity Engaging in political activism Engaging in environmentally-friendly practices	Valuing well-being for yourself and others Supportive campus norms Faculty who teach about these things Faculty and staff who model these things School-supported opportunities to engage civically

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