



# Inter-association Definition of Well-being

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## Purpose & Background

*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 well-being in higher education settings. Additionally, we acknowledge that well-being is not solely a place-based concept. An opportunity exists for us to consider well-being more broadly in a plurality of higher education contexts, including the online environment. In this manner, connectedness to the institution is an overarching sense that students take with them wherever they go.

## 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 within three broad and interrelated categories: (a) the perceived assessment of one's own life as 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.

## Individual well-being

Individual well-being is more explicitly defined by three interrelated components – subjective well-being, objective well-being, and civic well-being. Table 1 presents the definitional and contributing factors by individual well-being component.

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 and low on measures of negative mood. 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. Objective wellbeing includes but is not limited to: sufficient resources such as food, housing, safety, and physical/mental health care; experiences of systemic equity and diversity; experiences of liberty and freedom of participation at all levels of society; and experiences of unfettered human rights such as freedom of speech, voting access, and justice system protections.
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 institution, local, state, national, and global communities. Recognizing their own value and impact on the whole community, they actively participate in at least one behavior that benefits others. Additionally, they reject biased and prejudicial beliefs, and work within communities that are anti-racist and established to address and overcome social injustice. In other words, they act in support of the subjective and objective well-being of others, rather than detracting from it.

## Community well-being

Community well-being is similarly defined by two interrelated components – subjective well-being and objective well-being. Although a community cannot be well if its members are not well, community well-being mainly refers to the structures, systems, and normative behavior of the community rather than the sum of individual well-being. Individuals striving for well-being need communities of well-being to engage fully in this pursuit. Table 2 presents the definitional and contributing factors by community well-being component.

1. **Subjective community well-being** is a collective perception expressed by groups of people regarding their shared sense of community and satisfaction with community life. Additionally, people perceive that the overall quality of life is good and just for all community members regardless of differences across individual identities.
2. **Objective community well-being** is an externally verifiable measure of the structures, systems, practices, values, and normative behaviors that contribute to sufficient and equitable opportunities, resources, conditions, and other socio-ecological factors that make a particular community setting more conducive to the achievement of full potential beyond what is possible for a single individual. It is also important to recognize that institutions of higher education are embedded in a larger society and are dependent on the well-being of the ecosystems of the planet.

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

	<b>Definitional Factors</b>	<b>Contributing Factors:</b> What are the necessary skills, resources, and conditions?
<b>Subjective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Feeling happy</li> <li>Life satisfaction</li> <li>Self-esteem</li> <li>Feeling hopeful/content</li> <li>Feeling calm/at peace</li> <li>Limited experience of negative moods</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Healthy coping and stress management skills</li> <li>Optimism</li> <li>Appropriate/healthy skepticism</li> <li>Meaning</li> <li>Purpose</li> <li>Belonging</li> <li>Engagement in activities and academics</li> <li>Social support networks</li> <li>Achievement</li> <li>Mastery</li> <li>Supportive campus norms, policies, practices, resources, and spaces</li> <li>Faculty and staff who design curriculum and programs with these factors in mind</li> <li>Faculty and staff who model these factors</li> </ul>
<b>Objective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sufficient resources such as food, housing, safety, and physical/mental health care</li> <li>Experiences of systemic equity and diversity</li> <li>Experiences of liberty and freedom of participation at all levels of society</li> <li>Experiences of unfettered human rights such as freedom of speech, voting access, and justice system protections.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supportive campus norms, policies, practices, and resources (see Community Well-being)</li> </ul>
<b>Civic</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Valuing doing good for others</li> <li>Valuing political engagement</li> <li>Valuing humanitarian rights</li> <li>Valuing volunteering</li> <li>Being connected to others regardless of identity</li> <li>Engaging in political activism</li> <li>Engaging in environmentally-friendly practices</li> <li>Valuing well-being for yourself and others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supportive campus norms, policies, practices, and resources</li> <li>Faculty and staff who teach about these things</li> <li>Faculty and staff who model these things</li> <li>School-supported opportunities to engage civically</li> </ul>

Table 2. Definitional and Contributing Factors by Community Well-Being Component

	<b>Definitional Factors</b>	<b>Contributing Factors:</b> What are the necessary skills, resources, and conditions?
<b>Subjective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Equity</li> <li>Sense of community</li> <li>Collective efficacy</li> <li>Social capital</li> <li>Place and planet</li> <li>Satisfaction with the community</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Respect, fairness, and justice for all</li> <li>Equal opportunity to achieve full potential</li> <li>Resilience and empowerment</li> <li>Interpersonal relationships</li> <li>Shared emotional connection</li> <li>Shared sense of identity</li> <li>Belonging</li> <li>Influence</li> <li>Trust</li> <li>Cooperation, co-creation, and reciprocity</li> <li>Integration and fulfillment of needs</li> <li>Leadership of beneficence, integrity, competence, and vision</li> <li>Satisfaction with the institution</li> <li>Institutional pride</li> </ul>
<b>Objective</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Safety</li> <li>Accessible, secure sources of food and housing</li> <li>Accessible health-supporting services</li> <li>Accessible culture and arts</li> <li>Accessible recreation and leisure opportunities</li> <li>Systemic equity</li> <li>Systemic diversity</li> <li>Liberty and freedom of participation at all levels of society</li> <li>Unfettered human rights</li> <li>Environmental quality and ecosystem stability</li> <li>Sustainability</li> <li>Economics</li> <li>Infrastructure/buildings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supportive policies, practices, and norms</li> <li>Supportive campus expectations and norms</li> <li>Sufficient resources and allocation of resources on campus</li> <li>Fair and equitable distribution of resources on campus</li> <li>Available helping relationships</li> <li>Procedures and practices that facilitate sense of community, relationships, and social connection</li> <li>“Green spaces” and good air quality</li> <li>Biophilic design</li> </ul>

## References

The definitional and contributing factors were drawn from established frameworks/research/measures of wellbeing. We include some of those references below in alphabetical order.

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