

# What Is Student Well-Being?

## A Definition for Those Who Teach Students in Blended and Online Higher Education Settings

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In blended and online learning higher education environments, researchers have identified various factors that contribute to students' success (e.g., Gering, Sheppard, Adams, Renes, & Morotti, 2018; Hart, 2012; Lee & Choi, 2011; Rovai, 2003). However, much less is known about factors that build and sustain overall student well-being for blended and online learners. As researchers of the science of positive education explore the mechanisms of *flourishing* (Fink, 2014; Seligman, 2011) in educational environments within the broader umbrella of social and emotional learning ("What is SEL," n.d.), it is also crucial to investigate ways to optimize online and blended students' well-being. A first step in this process is understanding what well-being means. In this article, we define "student well-being" and share a few resources related to well-being that may be useful to those who work in institutions of higher education.

### **WHAT DOES STUDENT WELL-BEING" MEAN?**

There is no consensus around a single definition of well-being, but there is gen-

eral agreement that at minimum, well-being includes the presence of positive emotions and moods (e.g., contentment, happiness), the absence of negative emotions (e.g., depression, anxiety), satisfaction with life, fulfillment and positive functioning. In simple terms, well-being can be described as judging life positively and feeling good. (National Center for Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, Division of Population Health, 2018, para. 7)

The notion of student well-being is rooted in the science of positive psychology, a field that aims to understand the components and experiences of subjective well-being (SWB). SWB, sometimes thought of in lay terms as "happiness" (Diener, Scollon, & Lucas, 2009, p. 67), is a concept from positive psychology that has evolved over decades. Early research suggested that SWB represented cognitive and affective evaluations of one's life based on an individual's subjective sense of life satisfaction and experiences of emotions (Diener, 1984). More recent investigations have attempted to identify the components of well-being; for example, Seligman (2011) proposed the PERMA model of well-being, indicating that well-being consists of expe-

periences of positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. Some research has investigated whether the evolution of such models provides additional useful context to enhance understanding SWB (e.g., Goodman, Disabato, Kashdan, & Kauffman, 2018; Seligman, 2018); however, it has resulted in mixed results.

As researchers have investigated the construct of SWB further, some have attempted to understand experiences of well-being as they relate to different domains of life (Rath & Harter, 2010), environments (Littlecott, Moore, & Murphy, 2018), or social identity (Sharma & Sharma, 2010). One strand of research that has emerged from these efforts is the concept of *positive education*. Positive education has been defined as education that provides both traditional academic instruction and instruction that addresses happiness (Seligman, Ernst, Gillham, Reivich, & Linkins, 2009). More recent studies have investigated teacher well-being (Renshaw, Long, & Cook, 2015), student well-being (Graham, Powell, & Truscott, 2016; Hughes, Franz, & Willis, 2019; Simmons, Graham, & Thomas, 2015), and the interaction between the two (Milatz, Lüftenegger, & Schober, 2015; Roffey, 2012; Spilt, Koomen, & Thijs, 2011), providing important insights about what it means for both adults and youth to flourish in educational settings.

Even more specifically, there has been an accelerated focus on both undergraduate and graduate student well-being in higher education settings (Bamonti et al., 2014; Bringing Theory to Practice, 2013). An important concept in this work has been the delineation of student well-being in higher education as more than merely happiness, but rather related to the broader concept of *eudaimonia*, an Aristotelian concept involving the notion that the good life includes not just happiness, but also agentic elements such as the will to participate politically, think philosophi-

cally, and fully develop human rationality and capabilities (Robinson, 1989). Some researchers suggest then that student well-being in higher education is comprised of a fundamental eudaimonic element that underlies the construct, in which a sense of well-being emerges from and is supported by foci on the highest human good and development of capabilities, a sense of agency, a sustainable sense of purpose, and self-realization (Bringing Theory to Practice, 2013). Therefore, the facilitation of student well-being in higher education should include efforts to help students flourish in their roles and identities as students. This may include providing opportunities for persistence and self-realization, mindfulness and purposefulness in their work, civic engagement for the common good, and transformative learning experiences that encourage the development of the whole person, and not only the academic element of a student's identity (Bringing Theory to Practice, 2013).

However, it is critical to note that it is incumbent upon leaders, faculty, and staff in institutions of higher education (IHEs) to encourage cultural shifts, create infrastructure, and provide opportunities for their students to develop this type of eudaimonic well-being over the course of their studies. Students, on their own, cannot create spaces and experiences where this type of well-being can be developed, nor should they be solely responsible to seek it out. Instead, those who lead and work in IHEs must make a commitment to value this holistic approach to student well-being and develop, support, and sustain a higher education environment in which all members of the community can work toward an advanced state of well-being. Thus, it is also critically important that IHE stakeholders recognize and address structures that may prevent students from certain groups, especially those who have been traditionally marginalized (e.g., first generation students, students of color, students from economically disad-

vantaged backgrounds) from capitalizing on opportunities for well-being. Therefore, an explicit focus on cultivating a sense of belonging for *all* students in every learning space (Strayhorn, 2019) is a first and fundamental step in any effort to promote holistic student well-being.

## RESOURCES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS' WELL-BEING

Many IHEs have wellness programs or centers to help promote students' (Baik, Larcombe, & Brooker, 2019; Harward, 2016), as well as faculty and staff members' well-being. Since well-being can span so many aspects of stakeholders' lives, it is challenging to share a comprehensive list of resources. A good place to start is to examine resources available within one's IHE or the following:

- Council for the Advancement of Standards for Higher Education's Cross-Functional Framework for Advancing Health and Well-Being: [https://www.cas.edu/store\\_product.asp?prodid=154](https://www.cas.edu/store_product.asp?prodid=154)
- This Way Up—this site is a self-paced module to help college students with their well-being: <https://thiswayup.org.au/how-we-can-help/courses/student-wellbeing/>
- Resources for Institutions Working on Student Well-Being: <https://www.aacu.org/centennial/bringtocampus/resources/wellbeing>
- Student Minds—Has numerous resources for undergraduate and post-graduate students: <https://www.studentminds.org.uk/resources.html>
- NIRSA's List of Models and Dimensions of Well-Being: <https://nirsa.net/nirsa/portfolio-items/health-and-wellbeing-models-and-dimensions/>
- Complete a survey to learn about various aspects of well-being:

- o Life Satisfaction: <http://www.meaningandhappiness.com/life-satisfaction-measure-yours/63/>
- o Values in Action Inventory of Strengths (VIA-IS)—This survey measures your strengths: <http://www.viacharacter.org/Survey/Account/Register>

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