



## **Toward a Well-Being+Equity Collaboratory Project Outline and Next Steps**

**(Drafted by David Scobey, October, 2020)**

This memo lays out the context and sketches ideas for a collaborative project focused on student well-being, educational equity, and the connections between them. It will have two overarching goals. First, distilling and disseminating research and model practices that can help to overcome disparities in student thriving and success across racial, class, and other lines. Second, raising public and academic understanding of the interdependence between these educational commitments, in order to place equity at the heart of the well-being agenda and well-being at the heart of the equity agenda. The collaboratory, in short, aims both to improve educational practice and to change educational values.

### **Context**

In recent years, well-being and equity have become matters of urgent concern for higher education. Survey data and campus experience point to significant declines in student thriving and mental health. Racial and class disparities in academic success, access to high-impact practices, psychosocial well-being, and sense of belonging at college remain stubbornly high. The current crisis—the pandemic, the ensuing economic catastrophe, the ongoing harms of white supremacy—have only intensified the threats to both well-being and equity. If we fail to overcome these threats, higher education cannot advance its mission of helping students to build lives of meaning and action in their communities, at work, and for our diverse democracy. And neither problem can be solved without solving the other. Inclusive well-being—the thriving of the whole student for all students—has to be a core goal of undergraduate education.

The urgency of these issues has catalyzed important responses from researchers, practitioners, policy advocates, and higher-ed associations in the fields of student life, educational psychology, college health, mental health, equity and inclusion, and student learning. Even as these experts developed their own research, campus innovations, and model practices, we have seen a welcome tendency toward collaboration and integration. Research initiatives like the Healthy Minds Network are exploring the implications of their work for campus practice. The JED Foundation and the Steve Fund have partnered to produce the Equity in Mental Health Framework. The Network on Improvement and Innovation in College Health has launched the 20x30 Learning and Action Network, linking health-related interventions to broader paradigms of personal and social well-being. Psychologists like Laurie Schreiner and the Wake Forest Wellbeing Collaborative are investigating disparities in student thriving across racial, class, and other lines. Experts on pedagogy like Elon University's Center for Engaged Learning are emphasizing the importance of well-being

for academic engagement and attainment. There is a growing realization that student thriving and educational inclusion depend on each other.

But the work of integration remains unfinished and uneven. Notwithstanding signal examples of “well-being universities,” supports for student mental health have progressed further than more general attention to student flourishing. Even within the area of student health, best practices for overcoming racial and class disparities are still developing. Perhaps most importantly (and again, with notable exceptions), faculty and academic units tend to lag behind their colleagues in student life and student health in understanding and contributing to inclusive well-being.

This collaborative project aims to advance these unfinished tasks. It brings together researchers, practitioners, and advocates to distill and disseminate model practices for inclusive well-being and to mobilize support for them. And it does so with particular (but not exclusive) attention to the role of faculty and academic practice in meeting this commitment.

In spring 2020, Bringing Theory to Practice invited a diverse community of experts and exemplars—all of us grappling with the need to integrate these dual challenges—to envision and develop the initiative described here. BT2P is committed to serving as a convener and facilitator and working to attain the funding it would require. Yet it is a shared enterprise whose goals, values, and criteria of success will be co-created and whose work will be sustained in ongoing collaboration.

The planning group held a series of digital meetings in spring, 2020 to outline the themes, goals, and composition of a potential collaboratory. It was agreed that the next step should be a catalyst workshop that convenes some 25-30 stakeholders to more fully conceptualize, design and (ideally) launch a multi-year initiative. Our plan is to convene the catalyst meeting in late 2020 or early 2021.

### **Initial project outline**

What follows is a preliminary outline of the planning group’s discussions. We envision a multi-year project comprising perhaps 25 partners with sustained connections to one another and regular meetings over several years. It would involve both individual and collective participants: researchers, thought-partners, research projects, advocacy organizations, and academic institutions. Participants would include a number of researchers in health, well-being, and equity, bringing existing data and knowledge to the table; a small circle of national organizations and advocates who are expert in these areas; and a larger group of colleges and universities, committed to (but not necessarily leaders in) assessing and improving their practices of inclusive well-being. It would include institutions from diverse sectors, with diverse missions, serving diverse student populations, and exploring a variety of programmatic interventions. It would also include students as colleagues and co-leaders—perhaps as members of institutional teams, perhaps as part of a separate student council or network.

Participants would work through shared governance, co-developing goals, measures of success, and norms for working together. (Student voice would be important in formulating such goals and values.) Participants would be committed to sustaining collaboration over the course the project and to disseminating the practices and values it distills.

The planning group’s discussions of the goals and activities of the larger project coalesced around four key areas:

- 1) Distilling and disseminating what researchers already know, but administrators and faculty don't fully understand, about student well-being and disparities. Massive new data-gathering, it was agreed, isn't required. What is needed is "translational advice" that gives institutional leaders and academics usable definitions and practical guidance for operationalizing research knowledge. The Equity in Mental Health Framework, co-developed by the JED Foundation and the Steve Fund, is an important start in the area of mental health supports for students of color, but more is needed.
- 2) Launching a diverse network of campus projects that test and model best practices for inclusive excellence. The goal would not be to assemble a raw aggregate of programs. It would be to curate a compact "canon" of evidence-based models. Important elements would include: attention to faculty and academic practices; inclusion of students in the design and implementation of projects; and projects (and teams) that link curricular and co-curricular spaces.
- 3) Documenting and analyzing the effects of model practices on student thriving, attainment, and academic engagement across lines of class, race, area of study, institutional sector, and other differences. Such outcomes assessment should mix quantitative and qualitative research, and it should foreground student voice and self-understanding. The results would provide feedback for ongoing improvement of campus practices and translational guidance.
- 4) Creating deliverables to build academic and public understanding of inclusive well-being as a core purpose of higher education and a measure of its success.

### **Elements of the catalyst workshop**

The outline above is a first draft. The next step, as noted, would be a catalyst convening aimed at developing the conceptualization, project design, and timeline of the collaboratory. Before the pandemic, the planning group had envisioned a day-and-a-half workshop. We now plan on a digital convening—in December, 2020, if such a quick turn-around is feasible, or in early 2021. Let me offer a preliminary sketch of the shape of such a meeting, as a prompt to final planning.

I envision discussions of perhaps six-eight hours, divided over two or three afternoons. It should include not just the planning group, but an expanded circle of 25-30 participants. In fact I assume that the catalyst meeting starts to approximate the composition of the collaboratory itself (although I am sure the discussions will point to others who should be included).

The organization of this meeting, in other words, is a key (but not sole) decision-point for thinking through who—people, institutions, areas of expertise—should be around the larger 'table' of the collaboratory. The planning group, for instance, has a strong representation of research universities such as George Mason, Georgetown, the University of Michigan, and Wake Forest. How do we make sure the mix of campuses includes minority-serving institutions, comprehensive universities, and community colleges, so important to the nexus of well-being and equity? Similarly how do we include the best mix of academic and student-support experts? And how do we best include students as colleagues and co-creators?

The 'how' of the catalyst workshop will be as important as the 'who.' The meeting will serve a crucial community-building function: an opportunity not only to educate one another about the

interests, research, and experience we bring to the table but also to begin to set shared goals, norms, and measures of success for the project. It will be important to have time for introductions and reflection (not to mention ice-breakers and physical movement).

I also think that we will need to spend time on the ‘when’ of this initiative: the fact that we are starting at a moment when student well-being and racial equity are especially urgent. This project was already imperative a year ago. What are the implications of the current crisis—the pandemic, the economic collapse, deepening inequality, and the reckoning over white supremacy—for the goals, shape, and timeline of the work?

### Goals and topics for the catalyst workshop

Alongside these functions of community-building, norm-setting, and reflection, what goals and agenda topics should the catalyst meeting include? Here is a preliminary roster of issues that I would propose for consideration:

- Do the overall **goals** of the WB+E collaboratory—the overcoming of racial and class disparities in student thriving and the integration of well-being and equity in public and academic conversation—seem correct? Do they need revision?
- What **working definitions** of “well-being” and “equity” are we relying on? What is the scope of our understanding of “equity”? Are we focused solely on disparities of class and race? Are we building attention to student sexuality, religious identity, immigration status, or other factors into our design?
- Do the four **core activities** proposed above—translational research, a network of campus projects aimed at distilling model practices, outcomes assessment, and public communications—seem correct? If so, how should the overall project design fit these ‘atoms’ into a coherent ‘molecule’
  - How should we organize a team to produce **deliverables that translate** the existing research of our partners (Schreiner’s Thriving Quotient, Healthy Minds Network, Wake Forest’s Well-Being Collaborative, and others) to campus administrative and academic leaders?
  - How should we organize a team to guide the **outcomes assessment** thread of the work, melding the assessment of our campus projects with more general research into student outcomes?
- How do design a **network of projects** to test and distill model practices for ‘inclusive well-being’? What mix of institutions should be represented? What range of students should the mix of projects encompass? How in particular do we leverage the role of faculty and academic practices in the mix of projects? How do we connect curricular and co-curricular practices in the mix of projects. (**This seems to me personally the hardest issue to solve.**)

- The Steve Fund, the Jed Foundation, the Healthy Minds Network, Schreiner's Thriving Quotient surveys, and the Wake Forest Well-Being Collaborative already work with robust networks of campuses. Are there ways **leveraging their relationships** for this project, even as we seek to integrate their expertise in different domains?
- Planning discussions have emphasized the importance of student voice in this collaboratory, not only through qualitative research of the student experience, but also by including students as co-designers and investigators. How do we build **student leadership and agency** into the project design?
- What is the **timeline** for the collaboratory?
- What are the **expectations of participants**? How can we ensure regular communications, shared goal-setting, and shared governance?
- What **counts as success** for the WB+E collaboratory? What **deliverables** (translational advice, project documentation, public communications) will it produce?
- How and where can we **fund** it?