



## Well-Being: An Essential Outcome for Higher Education

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# WELL BEING

## An Essential Outcome for Higher Education

By Ashley Finley

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### **In Short**

- The promise of higher education is not only to influence how students learn to think but also to learn who they are as individuals, as collaborators, and as social actors.
- Evidence suggests compelling linkages of student learning to students' sense of empowerment, self-efficacy, and self-confidence.
- Learning experiences tied to community engagement may provide the greatest effect on students' increased sense of well-being.
- Campus examples demonstrate how intentional programming can help provide connections between well-being outcomes, the institutional mission, and academic and student affairs.
- Campus leaders can take several practical steps toward developing their institution's commitment to fostering well being and whole student development.

Several years ago my colleague Tia McNair and I conducted a research study on the engagement of underserved students in high-impact practices, including learning communities, service learning, internships, and undergraduate research. We visited nine four-year public universities in three states to do 15 focus groups with about 100 students who had been flagged as being low-income, from an under-represented minority group, first generation, or transfers from another institution (Finley & McNair, 2013).

We wanted to know what these students thought of the learning environments they were encountering on campus. We wanted to hear from those students—who, given demographic trends will rapidly become the new majority on many campuses—what types of learning actually mattered to them as they made their way through college. In what way did their learning affect them, influence their decisions, and inspire them to not just complete a college degree but actually take ownership of their own learning?

We learned a lot about what students do and don't know about high-impact practices. We learned, for example, that students think these practices can be meaningful *if* (and only if) they are done well. But they often do not know the practices by name, how to seek them out, why they are worth the “extra time,” or what their larger purpose is relative to other experiences on campus.

Upon further analysis of the focus-group transcripts, something interesting emerged from students' comments about not just high-impact practices but their learning in general. When talking about learning, students often described how some of the best in- and out-of-classroom experiences had helped them to feel differently about themselves.

I think on a personal note, it made me realize that I grew up thinking that I couldn't be here, but here I am now doing all this, and so it made me realize my self-worth, and that I could ask abstract questions, and I could go out and find answers to them, and then tell other people about it who are also wondering the same thing that I'm wondering.

Student in Oregon

Learning also helped students realize the scope and depth of their abilities.

There is no organization or professor to hold your hand [after college], and doing certain of these things on your own lets you know that you can do that.... You can't help anybody unless you can actually do it yourself in the first place. So I think [college provides the] empowerment of knowing I can do this. This is what I'm capable of, and having that awareness gives you the courage to do other things and keep moving.

Student in Wisconsin

Finally, learning convinced students that they could affect change in the world and in their lives.

I think [college has] impacted everything from the way I vote to what I shop for to what I do with my garbage.... I'm more engaged in the community when it comes to different things that stand for something. I think that's what college should be about. I think it's impacted everything when it comes to my connection with the community and the world around me.

Student in Oregon

What these student comments and many more like them revealed was that higher education does more than give students the skills and capacities to be productive members of the workforce. It gives them the confidence, self-esteem, and sense of purpose that will enable them to find meaning in their lives and careers.

These outcomes can seem foreign to faculty until they are framed in terms of empowerment in the classroom or students taking ownership of their learning. We often separate assessment of student learning from the very outcomes that could be the most predictive of student success: the confidence and perseverance to want to stay in school, to want to take on an internship, to stay on the path to graduation. We already know that particular college experiences contribute significantly to the well-being of college alumni after college (Gallup-Purdue Index 2015), why not attend to the connection of learning and well-being while students are still *in* college?

### STUDENT WELL-BEING AND LEARNING: THE BRINGING THEORY TO PRACTICE PROJECT

For over a decade, the national Bringing Theory to Practice (BTtoP) project has promoted the idea that well-being is an essential outcome of college students' learning and civic engagement. The project emphasizes the full promise of a liberal education: to be liberally educated is to possess the complex skills and abilities necessary for navigating an ever-changing, highly diverse global world.

But a liberal education includes not only intellectual skills—it also includes the personal capacities that help students to flourish in their lives and future careers. In its “Statement on Liberal Learning,” the Association of

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American Colleges and Universities (1998), which works in partnership with Bringing Theory to Practice, provides a philosophy of a liberal education that is both interpersonal, gained through students' civic learning and connectedness, and intrapersonal, gained by enabling students to think independently and to seek meaning for themselves.


Because liberal learning aims to free us from the constraints of ignorance, sectarianism, and myopia, it prizes curiosity and seeks to expand the boundaries of human knowledge. By its nature, therefore, liberal learning is global and pluralistic. It embraces the diversity of ideas and experiences that characterize the social, natural, and intellectual world. To acknowledge such diversity...is both an intellectual commitment and a social responsibility, for nothing less will equip us to understand our world and to pursue fruitful lives. (AAC&U, 1998)

The expectation is that a liberal education should enable *all* students to understand their civic responsibilities and to connect to others on campus and in local, national, and global communities. Through this civic commitment and shared understanding, students will not only find joy in learning—they will gain a larger sense of who they are and the value of their contributions within and across communities, a sentiment echoed in the focus group comments above.

By providing modest funding, BTtoP supports campus programs and practices connecting students' learning and civic efforts in engaged-learning practices—such as learning communities, first-year seminars, and service-learning courses—to outcomes related to their personal growth and well-being.

Across a diverse range of campus projects and programs aimed at aligning well-being, learning, and civic engagement, a majority of campuses (approximately 57 percent) concluded that the program or intervention resulted only in positive outcomes related to students' well-being, such as an increase in students' trust in themselves, self-efficacy, sense of flourishing, increased sense of purpose, and self-acceptance. More than a quarter of the campuses reported a combination of positive and negative results across various well-being outcomes, and approximately 16 percent reported only negative or no change in them at the conclusion of the program.

Tufts University, Wagner College, and St. Lawrence University exemplify a few of the BTtoP campus projects that have provided insights into the connection between student learning, particularly through community engagement, and well-being. In examining students' participation in curricular and non-curricular service experiences, Tufts University found that elements of these experiences were particularly relevant to students' levels of flourishing. Specifically, positive effects on flourishing were found when students' perceived that the experience emphasized social change or political engagement. The element of social change within learning community engagement experiences was also shown to have the most persistent positive effect on students' sense of flourishing over time. Wagner College similarly



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studied student flourishing but did so through the lens of students' participation in learning communities. Project leaders at Wagner concluded that levels of student flourishing increased most significantly when students' learning community experiences involved a service-learning component where students engaged with a community partner, as compared with learning communities that involved only field trips into the community. St. Lawrence University used its required first-year program to evaluate the role of engaged-learning pedagogies on students' emotional well-being and flourishing. A multi-year study concluded that students who had participated in first-year seminars involving active learning, such as community-based research, had the highest levels of reported emotional well-being and sense of flourishing.

In an effort to deepen what we know about campus programs aimed at connecting learning, civic development, and well being, Bringing Theory to Practice launched its Well-being Initiative in 2013. The initiative provided funding over two years to 29 campuses to implement and assess the effects of targeted interventions on factors of student well-being. It also created a research partnership with Iowa State University to use the Personal and Social Responsibility Inventory (PSRI). The PSRI is a survey of students, faculty, and staff to measure the campus climate for fostering dimensions of personal and social responsibility, such as striving for excellence, contributing to a larger community, and perspective-taking (see <http://www.psri.hs.iastate.edu/>).

Through this partnership, a standardized flourishing scale was added to the PSRI instrument. Preliminary findings from this research illuminate the role of campus climate, beyond individual student experiences, in increasing students' sense of flourishing. Findings indicate students' sense of flourishing is more influenced by their perceptions of being in a campus environment that supports personal and social responsibility, than it is by a student's individual civic experiences, such as participating in service-learning (Mitchell, Reason, Hemer, Finley, forthcoming). Specifically, students' perceptions of climates that support the development of moral reasoning and contributing to a larger community were most associated with higher levels of flourishing among student respondents. The research

suggests the need for campuses to make systemic commitments to student learning that go beyond opportunities for one-off experiences and flow through multiple areas of the curriculum and co-curriculum, making that engagement pervasive and expected.

What follows are specific examples of programs funded through the BTtoP Well-Being Initiative. These programs exemplify the campuses' commitment to a liberal education that links well being with the institutional mission, resource allocation for sustained programmatic development, and faculty and staff engagement.

### Georgetown University: The Engelhard Project

Since 2005, Georgetown University has developed a curriculum-infusion program in which modules focused on well being are integrated into academic courses. In the Engelhard Project to Connect Life and Learning, faculty members and graduate students who teach in the program receive the designation of *Engelhard fellows*, and each is paired with a professional staff member (called *health professional fellows*) who helps implement the well-being modules within the course.

For example, in one Engelhard course in the mathematics department, students learned how to model the effects of alcohol and food intake on blood alcohol levels in order to understand how height and weight affect an individual's risk of impairment when drinking. Students' reflections on this exercise were part of a presentation on alcohol awareness to students by a health professional fellow from Georgetown's student health center.

As of spring 2014, the Engelhard Project has included 72 faculty members, over one hundred graduate teaching assistant student fellows, and more than 30 health professional fellows. The approximately 350 course offerings in the Engelhard Program span a range of fields, including the natural and applied sciences (biology, mathematics), humanities (performing arts, philosophy, English, theology), social sciences (sociology, psychology), and professional programs (nursing, business).

Nearly ten thousand students have participated in at least one Engelhard course. Sixty-five percent of Georgetown students have taken one Engelhard course, 23 percent two, 8 percent three, and 4 percent four or more. Following their

experience in this curriculum-infusion program, students reported a greater sense of awareness of well-being issues on campus and in their own lives. They have also reported feeling a greater sense of connection with faculty and staff. Similarly, faculty and staff have credited Engelhard courses with helping them reexamine course content in ways that can be more meaningfully tied to students' lives. As a result, classroom discussions have been enriched with new insights emerging from reflections on course material.

Assessments of the Engelhard Project have primarily been used to improve individual courses by providing instructors with student feedback in order to make the connections between well-being and course material more explicit. Now an endowed program at Georgetown, the project continues to recruit new faculty members from across the university and to invite current and past Engelhard fellows to reflect on their experiences through annual gatherings. Additional information can be found on the Engelhard Project's homepage: <https://cndls.georgetown.edu/project/engelhard/>.

### Chattanooga State Community College: The Executives in the Classroom Initiative

As a two-year institution, Chattanooga State Community College ("Chatt State") is committed to increasing access and improving economic success for its diverse student body, many of whom are low-income and first-generation students. Understanding that self-confidence, especially in the first year of college, is also an essential part of student success, Chatt State created a bridge program for incoming students that both helped them articulate who they are and who they want to be, and provided mentor support to realize those goals.

Through the Executives in the Classroom (EIC) project, first-year students engage in a 15-hour, two-week program in which they develop a self-reflection inventory, explore career options and pathways, and get connected with a mentor from a local business in Chattanooga. By engaging students individually and as a group in critical reflection and providing mentors to help them make the linkages between their college goals and career aspirations, students increase their understanding of their purpose in pursuing a college career and their belief that they can succeed.

Unlike Georgetown University's curriculum-infusion model, which has been developing for nearly a decade, Chatt State's EIC project began in 2014. In its pilot semester, the program included 90 mostly first-year students, two faculty, three staff members, and four community mentors.

At this point, the success of the program has been gauged by developing resources to sustain it. Interest among faculty has been high; the EIC course has been introduced into every academic area at the college. Senior leadership has also backed the program, providing a visible endorsement of the effort and encouragement for faculty participation. Anecdotal feedback from students has been overwhelmingly positive. Ongoing assessment efforts will link student participation in the program with persistence and completion rates. To read more about one of Chatt State's local business partnerships that support the EIC initiative, see

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<http://foundation-blog.chattanoogastate.edu/tag/bringing-theory-to-practice-grant/>.

### **The University of Nebraska-Lincoln: Dine, Dialogue and Pass It On**

Understanding that diversity means many things to many people and has many layers, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has developed a program to increase dialogue among faculty and staff about differences on campus and to build a more inclusive, sensitive campus environment. Starting with baseline data from a climate survey administered in 2014/2015, the Dine, Dialogue and Pass It On (DDPIO) program engages faculty and staff in conversations that can help to combat micro-aggressions on campus and in classrooms, develop a greater sense of awareness of how people articulate and define difference, and support community building through dialogue. The faculty and staff participants then take their new awareness into classrooms and various programs on campus.

Since the DDPIO program began in spring 2014, six two-hour workshops have been held with approximately 30 participants in each session. The workshops feature conversations catalyzed by a deck of playing cards specially designed for the program.

Each card has a question intended to prompt table discussion. One, for example, poses the question, "What do you appreciate about generations different from your own?" Another asks, "What is the difference between acceptance and tolerance?" Workshop ground rules reviewed at the beginning of each session help ensure that participants are in a safe, respectful, and reflective space for discussion.

Workshop participants have been inspired to use the playing cards in other forums and discussions on campus, leading to the Pass It On portion of the program's name. The cards have been used by faculty to facilitate classroom discussions; to foster professional development within programs such as learning communities and the student mentors program; to use as icebreakers for staff meetings; and to distribute as part of a leadership summit for 150 student leaders across UNL's fraternities and sororities. The card decks are also now being used in Nebraska's Lincoln Public Schools system and have drawn interest from other public school systems outside of the state.

Expansion of the program will focus on developing 1½-hour workshops for students. Graduate assistants will be trained as facilitators to lead those discussions and will continue to build capacity across the university. In this way, the program will expand its goal of supporting well-being by developing a campus community in which perspectives on difference are heard, appreciated, and supported. For more information on the DDPIO program, go to <http://stuafs.unl.edu/dine-dialogue-and-pass-it>.

### **Simon Fraser University: The Well-Being in Learning Environments Initiative**

As one part of its overarching Healthy Campus Community (HCC) initiative, which is aimed at fostering

a campus culture that promotes and supports student well-being, Simon Fraser University has created the Well-Being in Learning Environments (WLE) initiative. The initiative draws upon resources in both academic and student affairs, is closely connected with the university's mission and planning, and is championed by the university's senior leadership. The web-based resources developed as part of the initiative and funded through the HCC initiative help to make the connection of well-being and learning more transparent for students, faculty, and staff.

Though a relatively new initiative, the WLE has already reached over 50 faculty members and some five thousand students. Preliminary research from the WLE initiative included fourteen faculty members who helped gather over 1000 student surveys that asked students to report on aspects of the learning environment (i.e. opportunities for social connection, student engagement in learning, and real-world applications of learning), in addition to aspects of well-being (i.e. flourishing, happiness, sense of community and life satisfaction) (<https://www.sfu.ca/healthycampuscommunity/features/healthy-campus-community-2014-report.html>). The surveys revealed that students' perceived engagement in more engaged, interactive, and applied learning environments was associated with higher levels of well-being.

The project is also developing case studies to illustrate how academic departments have aligned well-being outcomes with departmental learning objectives and curricula. Other aspects of the project include measuring the sustainability of the HCC initiative through indicators of campus stakeholder engagement over time. Logic models are also being used to gauge changes meant to support student well-being across six areas: physical spaces, learning and working environments, policies and processes, services and supports, community engagement, and personal growth and development. For more information on the WLE and HCC initiatives, <https://www.sfu.ca/healthycampuscommunity.html> and <http://www.sfu.ca/healthycampuscommunity/learningenvironments/WLE.html>.

### **WHAT IT TAKES TO TAKE WELL-BEING SERIOUSLY ON CAMPUS**

The Bringing Theory to Practice project challenges the assumption that faculty view well-being as something that is "not their job" and best left to colleagues in students affairs. Some four hundred projects over the last decade have steadily demonstrated that, given the opportunity to engage in a discussion about well-being, faculty do understand the connection between student success and students' ability to thrive inside and outside the classroom.

But while many faculty members don't find these matters foreign or uncomfortable, they do need to explore them and understand how they relate to the learning their classroom through opportunities for civic learning and engagement. Like any campus initiative that involves new ideas and approaches to learning, engaging faculty and staff broadly in attending to the connection of student well-being with learning can be challenging.

To implement and sustain these types of efforts on their campus, campus leaders might consider the following strategies:

**Find the right language.** Bringing Theory to Practice has drawn heavily on the research on *flourishing* in working with campuses. Although the word seems to resonate in many places, it doesn't in all.

Campus leaders should look to the mission statement, strategic planning documents, and conversations with faculty, staff, and students to identify the language that will evoke interest in student well-being from a wide spectrum of campus constituents. Taking the well being of students seriously also means taking seriously the ability of the whole campus community to flourish.

**Connect this work with the core purposes of the institution.** For example, Jesuit institutions such as Georgetown use the Latin phrase *cura personalis*, or care for the entire person, as an essential part of their mission. Other campuses may have well being as an articulated learning outcome at the institutional level or within general education.

Similarly, Tidewater Community College, for example, has identified “personal development” among its “core competencies.” Campus-wide discussions can start with the question, “How are we keeping this institutional promise to students?” or “How can we make sure that this commitment is widely kept?”

**Build in flexibility.** For example, in Georgetown's curriculum-infusion model, the intensity and duration of the modules focused on well-being vary among courses and instructors. Faculty members who are Engelhard fellows can choose to infuse attention to well-being into a single course session, across multiple class sessions or units, or throughout the course. Some professors who choose the last model often opt to team-teach the course with a professional staff member.

This type of flexibility invites faculty and staff to connect well-being and learning in a way that is comfortable for them. In this way, faculty and staff engagement with campus change can be much like how people engage with new technologies. There is a small group of “early adopters” who are willing to gamble risk and disappointment for something cutting edge. There is the small group of “decliners,” who see the innovation as unnecessary. And then there is the large group, somewhere in the middle, of “wait and seers.” For the majority of people change is not easy or comfortable, but if given enough time and interaction they will at least entertain its usefulness.

This requires conversations, demystification, and perhaps a low-stakes trial run. Faculty and staff need to pilot courses or programs in order to work out the kinks and to learn what they could not have known ahead of time. Campus leaders focused on building a culture of well-being on campus should not seek “buy-in” as if they were selling a car but instead engage faculty and staff in conversations about practical ways to integrate the concept of well-being into their existing academic and professional lives.

**Recognize that students are not a homogeneous group.** Campus leaders undertaking conversations about flourishing and well being should be mindful of how issues of equity affect these outcomes and for whom. Personal growth and

well-being are likely to manifest themselves differently for different groups of students on campus. Not all students have the same support networks, access to resources, or confidence to seek out mentors for guidance. As campuses engage in conversations about equity and student success, the degree to which *all* students are flourishing is an important consideration.

John Dewey once said “To find out what one is fitted to do, and to secure the opportunity to do it, is the key to happiness.” Colleges and universities need to equip students not only with the skills to succeed, but also with the opportunity to seek happiness, fulfillment, and purpose to give meaning to their lives and careers.

When I see promotional materials from colleges and universities, the stories and photos of successful alums are often showcased to illustrate the institution's value. The smiles of those alums, however, are intended to convey something more than that they have a job now or had an internship experience two decades ago. Those photos are intended to communicate that their college education made them better people – by overcoming challenges, finding connection with others, finding a sense of purpose. We understand the power of notions of well-being for alumni. Somehow it takes students graduating and moving out into the world to recognize that they are whole people who both think *and feel*. We also implicitly recognize that post-graduate well-being is the culmination of many learning experiences, both inside and outside the classroom. The next step is to appreciate well-being as a set of outcomes that are not parallel to students' learning, but rather are *part of* their learning. Students are whole people the moment they set foot upon our campuses. We just need to start paying attention. ☐

## RESOURCES

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