



## **Toward a Well-Being+Equity Collaboratory**

**(Drafted by David Scobey, April, 2020, and revised September, 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 would 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, to place equity at the heart of the well-being agenda and well-being at the heart of the equity agenda. The collaboratory would aim to improve educational practice and to change educational values.

### **Context**

In recent years, well-being and equity have become matters of urgent attention for higher education. In 2020, the national reckoning over enduring harms of white supremacy, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the ensuing economic catastrophe have only intensified their urgency. 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 effects of the pandemic in higher education—emotional, physical, and economic stress, student isolation from campus communities and supports, unequal patterns of precarity and connection—have only intensified these problems. If we fail to meet both challenges, 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 coalition, 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 project aims to advance these unfinished tasks. It would bring together researchers, practitioners, and advocates to distill and disseminate what might be called “high-impact practices for inclusive well-being” and to mobilize support for them. And it would do so with particular (but not exclusive) attention to the role of faculty and academic practice in meeting this commitment.

BT2P is committed to partnering in this work, serving as a convener and facilitator, and working to attain the funding it would require. In spring 2020, BT2P invited a diverse community of experts and exemplars—all of us grappling with the need to integrate these dual challenges—to serve as thought-partners (and, it is hoped, partners) in the initiative described here. But this should be a shared enterprise whose goals, values, and criteria of success need to be co-created and whose work would be sustained in ongoing collaboration.

The planning group held two digital meetings during spring, 2020 to brainstorm the themes, composition, and goals of a potential collaboratory. It was agreed that the next step should be a catalyst workshop convening some 25-30 stakeholders to more fully develop and (ideally) launch a multi-year initiative. The planning group also formed two working groups—one focused on definitions and outcomes, the other on project design—to shape the catalyst meeting and further conceptualize the larger project. Both working groups met in the late spring of 2020, but progress was slowed by the pandemic, its effects on participants’ other responsibilities, and BT2P’s relocation from Washington, DC to Elon University during the summer. Although our original hope was to convene a virtual catalyst workshop before Thanksgiving, it will likely take place in early 2021.

### **Initial ideas**

The planning group’s initial meetings were extremely fruitful. What follows are key themes that emerged from the discussion. The planning group has begun to build on these thoughts, but they remain preliminary and in need of collective revision.

We envisioned a collaboration of some 25 participants—depending on the number of academic institutions involved—with sustained connections to one another and (given adequate resources) annual meetings over several years. The participants would include a small circle 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 be essential to include institutions from diverse sectors, with diverse missions, serving diverse student populations, and exploring a variety of programmatic interventions. It would also be essential to include students as colleagues and co-leaders.

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 also (ideally) to disseminating the practices and values it distills.

The planning discussions coalesced around four key areas of activity:

- 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 provides institutional leaders and academics with 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. Attention to faculty and academic practices would be especially important, as would 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.

This sketch, as I noted, is a first approximation. The planning group and collaboratory participants will need to focus and refine it; to develop a realistic timeline; and to articulate how the "atoms" of translational advice, campus experimentation, assessment, and public advocacy should work together as a "molecule." We will also need to cost out and pursue the significant resources it would take to accomplish something like this project design.