Research Brief

Well-being and College Success of Undergraduate Students

Melissa K. Kovich, MSN, RN, FNP-BC
Vicki L. Simpson, PhD, MSN, RN, CHES
Purdue University

ABSTRACT

Background: In order to build a culture of well-being among students in post-secondary academic communities, an assessment of current well-being and related factors is necessary. Common barriers to optimal well-being may include stress, anxiety, and depression in college students. Low levels of well-being have been associated with higher levels of impaired academic performance.
Aim: Explore the relationship between academic success and time spent performing well-being activities.
Methods: Seligman's Well-Being Theory was used to guide this study. The relationship between well-being and academic success of undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university (N = 5,008) was evaluated using data from a 278 item 2018 Student Experience at a Research University (SERU) survey. Measures of academic success included late assignments, going to class unprepared, and skipping class. Measures of well-being included time spent in physical exercise, spiritual practice, community service, and club participation; time with family and friends were also included.
Results: Pearson Chi-Square analysis revealed a total of five significant relationships between well-being activities and late assignments, being unprepared for class, and skipping class at $\alpha = .05$.
Conclusions: Further research is needed to understand the relationship between well-being and academic success to guide development of strategies to support well-being in university students.

Submitted 31 August 2019: accepted 18 September 2019
Keywords: college students, well-being, Well-Being Theory, academic success

Optimal well-being is desirable but may be difficult to obtain. Barriers to well-being in undergraduate college student populations include anxiety, stress, and depression. The 2017 Association for University and College Counseling Center Directors Annual Survey reports that the following three concerns were most prevalent among undergraduate students seen in campus counseling centers: Anxiety (48.2%), stress (39.1%), and depression (34.5%; Leviness, Bershad, & Gorman, 2017). Results from the 2017 National College Health Assessment revealed similar findings, with the following concerns self-reported by college students within the past 12 months: Hopeless (51.7%), exhausted-not due to physical activity (83.4%), overwhelmed (86.5%), very lonely (63.1%), considered suicide (12.1%), and attempted suicide (1.9%). These results suggest that well-being is threatened in undergraduate college students. Using a positive psychology approach may be useful in increasing well-being.

Well-being is a universal concept that is relevant to individuals, communities, populations, and countries. Well-being has been pursued and studied for centuries by various academic disciplines and researchers. A brief overview

of well-being definitions is useful in understanding the concept of interest and provides contextual clarity. Such clarity is important when moving forward to discussion of research methods and results.

There are numerous ways to view well-being. In a broad sense, well-being may refer to a condition of happiness, health, or prosperity (Merriam-Webster, 2019). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018) expand on the previous definition by stating that well-being is multi-dimensional, holistic, and refers to a person's overall state of being in the following health-related areas: physical activity, mental/emotional/social well-being, financial stability, life satisfaction, and engagement. In social science literature, Diener (1984) defines subjective well-being as positive emotions, lack of negative emotions, and satisfaction. A similar definition of well-being is used by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2013) which defines well-being in terms of three parts: life satisfaction, affect, and eudaimonia. In Seligman's Well-Being Theory (2011a), well-being is defined as a combination of cognitive happiness (satisfaction), hedonic happiness (feeling), and eudaimonia (meaning).

Suboptimal well-being levels may impact academic success of undergraduate students. According to the American College Health Association (2017), students felt that their academic performance was negatively impacted by stress (30%), anxiety (25%), and depression (17%). Further research is necessary to understand and improve well-being in undergraduate college student populations. This study aims to explore the relationship between well-being time use behaviors and academic success factors within undergraduate college students at a large public research university in the Midwestern United States.

METHODS

Well-Being Theory (Seligman, 2011b) was used as a framework for this study. Well-Being Theory identifies key constructs of well-being as positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment (PERMA). The relationship between well-being and academic success of undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university (N = 5,008) was assessed using data from the 2018 Student Experience at a Research University (SERU) survey. Developed and validated by John Aubrey Douglass and Richard Flacks, the SERU is composed of approximately 278 questions, and offers a systematic examination of the student experience at participating research-intensive universities within the United States (UC Berkeley Center for Studies in Higher Education, 2018). Measures of academic success from the SERU survey used in this study included late assignments, going to class unprepared, and skipping class. Measures of well-being included time spent in the following activities: physical exercise, spiritual practice, community service, and club participation, in addition to time with family and friends. See Table 1 for a description of well-being items. Refer to Table 2 for descriptions of academic success items.

Table 1

Measures of Well-Being From 2018 SERU

Variable	Description
Physical exercise	How many hours do you spend in a typical week (7 days) on the following activities?-Participating in physical exercise, recreational sports, or physically active hobbies
Spiritual practice	How many hours do you spend in a typical week (7 days) on the following activities?-Participating in spiritual or religious activities
Community service	How many hours do you spend in a typical week (7 days) on the following activities?-Performing community service or volunteer activities
Club participation	How many hours do you spend in a typical week (7 days) on the following activities?-Participating in student clubs or organizations
Family	How many hours do you spend in a typical week (7 days) on the following activities?-Spending time with family
Friends	How many hours do you spend in a typical week (7 days) on the following activities?-Socializing with friends

Response choices (hours): 0, 1-5, 6-10, 11-15, 16-20, 21-25, 26-30, >30

Table 2

Measures of Academic Success From 2018 SERU

Variable	Description
Late assignments	How frequently during this academic year have you done each of the following?-Turned in a course assignment late
Unprepared for class	How frequently during this academic year have you done each of the following?-Gone to class unprepared
Skipped class	How frequently during this academic year have you done each of the following?-Skipped class

Response choices: never, rarely, occasionally, somewhat often, often, very often

A census sampling method was utilized to administer the online Student Experience at a Research University (SERU) survey to all registered undergraduate students at a large Midwestern university in Spring 2018. Emails were sent to all currently registered undergraduate students prior to March 1, 2018. Undergraduate student population at the time of survey administration was approximately 33,000 students based on Fall 2018 undergraduate admission data. Thus, total response rate was approximately 15% of the undergraduate student population. Student participation was voluntary and encouraged via random drawings for Amazon gift cards. Institutional review board approval was obtained prior to survey administration by the Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Effectiveness at the university. For the purposes of this study, only de-identified data was utilized by researchers. The total sample size for the survey was 5,008, responses to the items used in this study varied from 1890 - 5008. Approximately 4,600 complete surveys were obtained. Self-reported demographic data indicated the following sample characteristics: 57% were female, 43% male; 90% identified as native, 10% international; and 12% were considered freshmen, 24% sophomores, 24% juniors, and 40% seniors.

RESULTS

Pearson Chi-Square analysis via SPSS version 26 revealed many significant relationships between time spent in well-being activities and academic success at $\alpha = .05$. Time spent in the following well-being activities had significant associations with late assignments at $\alpha = .05$: spirituality, club, friends, and family. Going to class unprepared was associated with the following at $\alpha = .05$: time spent participating in clubs. Skipping class was associated with time spent with friends at $\alpha = .05$: See results below (Table 3).

Table 3

Chi Square Test Results

Variable	Late Assignment	Class Unprepared	Skipped Class
Community Service	.125	.235	.321
Exercise	.066	.099	.379
Spirituality	.000*	.078	.129
Club	.006*	.035*	.134
Friends	.000*	.637	.000*
Family	.000*	.175	.197

*denotes significance at α=.05

DISCUSSION

Since well-being is a multidimensional concept, a combination of items is necessary to explore well-being of undergraduate college students. This exploratory analysis demonstrated that analysis of secondary data may be a useful method to examining the relationship between indicators of well-being and academic success of undergraduate students at a research-intensive university in the midwestern United States. Guided by Well-Being Theory (Seligman,

2011), time use items that pertain to positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishments may guide insight into important aspects of student life that are most influential to well-being of this population.

Results of this study are generally supported in previous studies of well-being in undergraduate college students. Coffey, Wray-Lake, Mashek, and Branand (2016) found support for Well-Being Theory in predicting college success, which included grade point averages and post-graduate employment opportunities (self-reported number of interviews for jobs, internships, and graduate school admission at end of senior year). Thus, it makes sense that time expenditure in well-being activities would correlate with academic success measures. Significant associations were noted with four of six well-being items in the study; community service and physical exercise were not significantly associated with any academic success measures in the study. Late assignments were associated with four out of six well-being items. Going to class unprepared was only associated with one well-being item (club participation). Skipping class was also associated with one well-being item (time with friends). These results suggest that different relationships may exist among well-being activities and academic success indicators. Additional research may look to explore the optimal time expenditure in well-being activities to produce positive academic outcomes.

There are some limitations to this study. This study of well-being was guided by constructs of Well-Being Theory (Seligman, 2011). There are other ways to define and measure well-being; additionally, there are many standardized scales for measuring such concepts. Also, this sample was obtained from a large Midwestern research-intensive university. Findings may represent unique characteristics of the university and may not be generalizable to other post-secondary academic populations. However, this study examines relationships between time expenditure in well-being activities and outcomes of student success. Further research is necessary to explore the strength and direction of relationships between well-being and indicators of academic success in undergraduate college students.

REFERENCES

American College Health Association. National College Health Assessment II Fall 2017 Reference Group Executive Summary. Retrieved from https://www.acha.org/documents/ncha/NCHA-II_FALL_2017_REFERENCE_GROUP_EXECUTIVE_SUMMARY.pdf

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). (2018). Well-being concepts. Retrieved from www.cdc.gov/hrqol/wellbeing.htm

Coffey, J. K., Wray-Lake, L., Mashek, D., & Branand, B. (2016). A Multi-Study Examination of Well-Being Theory in College and Community Samples. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, *17*(1), 187–211. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-014-9590-8

Diener, E. (1984). Subjective well-being. *Psychological Bulletin, 95(3),* 542-575. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.95.3.542

LeViness, P., Bershad, C., & Gorman, K. (2017). AUCCCD Director Survey 2016-17. Retrieved from https://www.aucccd.org/assets/2017%20aucccd%20survey-public-apr17.pdf

Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Well-being (2013). Retrieved from: https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-guidelines-on-measuring-subjective-well-being_9789264191655-en

Seligman, M. (2011a). *Flourish: A visionary new understanding of happiness and well-being*. New York: Atria Paperback.

Seligman, M. (2011b). What is well-being? Retrieved from https://www.authentichappiness.sas.upenn.edu/learn/wellbeing

UC Berkeley Center for Studies in Higher Education (2018). Student experience in the research university. Retrieved from https://cshe.berkeley.edu/seru

Merriam-Webster (2019). Well-being. Retrieved from www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/well-being

Author correspondence may be addressed to:
Melissa K. Kovich, MSN, RN, FNP-BC
PhD Candidate
mkovich@purdue.edu

Vicki L. Simpson, PhD, MSN, RN, CHES
Assistant Professor
vsimpson@purdue.edu
Purdue University
School of Nursing
Johnson Hall, Room 226 E
502 N. University Street
West Lafayette, IN 47907

Author's Note and Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Andy Zehner, Assessment & Data Analyst for sharing knowledge of the SERU survey and continued assistance.