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Feature
Happiness: Restoring Purpose to Higher Education
By Corey L. M. Keyes, Winship Distinguished Research Professor, Emory University

Creating students who can flourish in life is the overarching purpose of higher education.

If once we believe in life and in the life of the [student], then will all occupations and uses spoken of, then will all history and science become instruments of appeal and materials of culture to his imagination, and through that to the richness and orderliness of his life. —John Dewey, 2013 [1900]

A study of the well-being of midlife parents suggests that our job in higher education is as important to helping parents achieve their well-being as it is for their children. The study found that mothers and fathers rank education and happiness as their top hopes and aspirations for their children. Parents believe they have done a good job when their children receive a good college education and are happier for it. Also, the closer parents saw themselves to achieving those hopes and aspirations, the higher their own psychological well-being (Ryff, Schmutte, and Lee 1996). But what happens when one of those aspirations comes at the expense of the other—when getting a good education comes at the expense of happiness? Stress, sleep deprivation, loneliness, and mental ill-

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Sociologists have documented that education is as potent of a predictor of positive physical health as smoking and carcinogens are of negative health (Williams et al. 2010). We continue to want more because we react to change, and happiness is often a reflection of getting something better. We want more of something different, because the happiness we have is no longer enough and our expectations and standards have increased. So the cycle goes on with more growth, larger endowments, more buildings—and yet no lasting happiness or mental well-being for students, staff, or faculty. Welcome to the great deception.

As national wealth increases, the number of citizens achieving the "best possible life"—in a strictly economic sense—increases. However, as the wealth of nations increases, the number of citizens with an important meaning or direction in life decreases. Wealthy nations produce the most comfortable life without a lot of meaning (Oishi and Diener 2013).

Many of us believe universities have done the very same thing, leaving behind the heart and soul of a liberal arts education that focuses on the whole person, the whole student, the whole faculty and staff. Universities now have the resources to promote the best possible life without a lot of meaning in life for students. While becoming wealthier, our nation and colleges have become reactive and problem focused. With more wealth, institutions can provide more services to help those who become ill.

Nowhere is this more apparent than with the problem of mental illness in our country and colleges. We park more ambulances at...
the bottom of the cliff, thinking we can treat our way out of the problem. I am not against providing the best treatment to anybody in need; what I am against is not doing our best to prevent more of our students from breaking down in the first place. We are not fulfilling the mission of helping students to flourish.

Flourishing is feeling good about a life in which one is also able to function well. Flourishing combines two traditions of ancient thought about the nature of a good life. The first is the hedonic tradition, in which a good life consists of pleasure. The hedonic tradition is measured by asking people how often they have felt happy, satisfied, or interested in life. The second is the eudaemonic tradition, in which a good life is defined by developing one’s potential to function well as an individual and citizen.

Here, you are functioning well if

• your life has direction and meaning;
• you are confident to think and express your ideas and opinions;
• you are part of a community where you feel you belong;
• you are able to contribute things of worth and value to the world;
• you can make sense of what is going on around you in your world;
• you are accepting of other people;
• you are accepting of most parts of yourself;
• you are being challenged to become a better person; or
• you have warm, trusting relationships with other people.

Creating students who can flourish in life is the overarching purpose of higher education. When students walk across that stage and take their diploma, they should feel

• more interested in life than when they started;
• that they have more direction and meaning in life than when they started (more purpose);
• like they are better people than when they started (more personal growth);
• more accepting of themselves than when they started (more self-acceptance);
• more accepting of other people than when they started (more social acceptance);
• more able to contribute to the world than when they arrived (more social contribution); and
• that they belong to community and society more than when they arrived (more social integration).

Students who fit these criteria can be said to be flourishing—individuals who experience at least one of the three criteria for hedonic well-being along with at least six of the eleven criteria for eudaemonic well-being almost every day or every day. A benefit to families and colleges is that promoting flourishing reduces intention to dropout, reduces suicide, and reduces risk of developing mental illness (Dyrbye et al. 2012; Grant, Guill, and Sen 2013; Keyes, Dhingra, and Simoes 2010).

Wasn’t this the point of a liberal arts education? What is stopping us from reclaiming it as the highest aspiration of “higher” education? I believe what is stopping us in higher education is that our institutions have lost sight of the point of life. I want to paraphrase John Lennon (yes, from the Beatles),

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whose mother told him as a child that the point of life is happiness. When he started school, Lennon was given an assignment to write an essay describing the point of life. He simply wrote, ‘to be happy.’ His teacher wrote back, ‘you did not understand the assignment.’ Lennon wrote back, ‘you don’t understand life.’

Higher education does not understand life anymore. Higher education is not helping parents to realize their hopes and aspirations for their children; parents want their children educated and happy, not educated at the expense of their children’s happiness.

Editors’ note: Corey Keyes’s scholarly voice has led the national conversations regarding flourishing as a key expression of well-being for over two decades. Always championing consideration of the centrality and consequences of truly attending to well-being as a core purpose of higher education, Professor Keyes provoked a large audience in January at the AAC&U Centennial meeting. That talk is printed here for you to attend to its implications—and to what would be needed to put into place what he champions. That many of you, perhaps all, are part of institutions that are far from wealthy means that the challenges we are provoked to face are how to redirect resources and to redefine priorities. How to do so are the more important challenges for all of us. Stay tuned: BTtoP’s publications this year and next will feature a set of volumes examining how well-being is becoming understood, valued and practiced as a core purpose of higher education.

References


Throughout the next three years (2015–2017), the BTtoP Project will be supporting campuses through its grant opportunities—grants that act as “seeds of change,” helping campuses to make possible significant initiatives, discussions, and research. Whether these seeds “take hold” will be determined by the interest and commitment from a team of campus members. And, typically, they will grow “from the bottom up.” On other campuses, however, these initiatives will grow from their leadership’s attention to a national agenda regarding well-being and higher education—an agenda that is credible, compelling, and vigorously promulgated—under which campus work at the institution could be stimulated, sustained, recognized, and valued.

Building on the recognition of work that has already been achieved and on the gains from the campus initiatives that will be supported by BTtoP in 2015–2017, and drawing on new publications regarding well-being (analogous to The Civic Series, available on our website) we hope, with your assistance, to help to craft that national agenda.

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Kazi Joshua is the associate dean for intercultural affairs and chief diversity officer at Whitman College in Walla Walla, Washington, a liberal arts institution with a rich history of engagement. His essay “Is Well-Being an Individual Matter?” was offered as a ‘provocation’ at a BTtoP planning conference regarding well-being last November—and ‘provoke’ it did! His philosophical, yet practical, perspective regarding the reality of the necessary connection of learning and of self to community (other) is convincing: “I think that we are challenged to consider the well-being of students in the communal context in which they live and study.”

Elsa Núñez is president of Eastern Connecticut State University, a public regional university enjoying a well-earned reputation for championing engagement in learning. Her remarks, “Student Well-Being as a Function of Identity Development,” were given when she served as a panelist in a BTtoP featured session at the AAC&U Annual Meeting Centennial Symposium this January. She told a story that drew on her own experiences and those of her students, and its significance transcends those particulars. “[T]he issue of identity [gender, race, social class; personal and group] which our students face is crucial…[H]ow a student feels about themselves and the world around them is central to their motivation and capacity to learn.”

Several colleagues close to BTtoP over many years have also each provided a clear and strategically helpful “voice”—especially for those developing a proposal in response to the RFP. In “Strengthening Diversity and Social Justice in Higher Education,” Barry Checkoway poses strategic questions for involving first-generation or low-income (continued on page 6)
students or students of color in academically based educational programs that contribute to their well-being. “Faculty members are strategically situated to promote the well-being of these students”—and he suggests how they might consider doing so.

In “Well-Being of All Participants Builds Success,” Jill Reich argues that “[it] is vital to the success of our colleges and universities to consider the well-being of faculty and other professional educators…. Are faculty and staff supported…and valued for using engaging pedagogies…?” She asks us to reflect on what faculty identity, and well-being, now mean and how they are understood and attended to.

Ashley Finley’s piece, “The Evidence on Well-Being: A Synopsis of Bringing Theory to Practice Research,” is a most impressive voice of evidence. Not only are the findings striking, but the report is unique in comparing studies of campus data from BTtoP grants to national research projects related to student well-being. It presents some of the growing evidentiary basis for the Project’s advancement of the connections among engaged learning, student well-being, and students’ deepened civic engagement.

These are but a few of many voices and perspectives which reflect and document a theme of connecting engagement and well-being. We are indebted to Corey Keyes for his essay published in this issue, and are equally indebted and encouraged by the voices mentioned above—as we know you will be. They provide essential insights regarding what must be reflected in any valuable national and collaborative agenda for well-being and higher education.

Apply for a BTtoP Grant

First Deadline: August 1, 2015

To date, BTtoP has awarded over 460 grants at varying levels to a diverse group of colleges and universities. For the 2015–2017 funding cycle, proposals are requested in the following categories:

**Category I: Well-Being Seminar Grants**

Seminar Grants (ranging from $1,000 to $5,000, depending on whether a single or series of seminars is proposed) provide support for discussions that focus on a particular dimension of the well-being of those engaged in learning: students, faculty, student affairs professionals, and other campus educators. Seminars should deepen participants’ understanding of the institution’s commitment to whole-person development and to the policies and practices that support it.

The first deadline for Seminar Grant proposals is September 15, 2015.

**Category II: Well-Being Project Research Grants**

Project Research Grants (up to $10,000, plus institutional matching) should implement and assess a campus-based, two-year research project that focuses on the well-being of students, particularly those traditionally underserved by higher education. Projects should, through the gathering of evidence, provide justification for best practices that deepen and sustain the institution’s commitment to whole-person development.

The deadline for Project Research Grant proposals is August 1, 2015.

BTtoP’s full 2015–2017 RFP and supporting materials are available at: http://www.bttop.org/grants-funding/funding-opportunities
In Brief: BTtoP News and Notes

News

New Delphi Project Report on the Future of Faculty

Adrianna Kezar and Daniel Maxey (codirectors of the Delphi Project on the Changing Faculty and Student Success, an initiative in partnership with the AAC&U and housed at the USC Rossier School of Education) released a new report in February 2015 titled “Adapting by Design: Creating Faculty Roles and Defining Faculty Work to Ensure an Intentional Future for Colleges and Universities.” From the report’s authors: “The erosion of a strong and well-established academic profession, in the absence of new visions to replace the status quo, has implications for a broader deterioration of the higher education enterprise as a whole…. [This report] aims to spark a new discussion and more widespread debate about the future of the academic profession.”

Visit http://adaptingbydesign.thechangingfaculty.org/ for access to the full report.

28th Annual NCORE and Opportunity to Participate in Research

Rebecca Dolinsky (Association of American Colleges and Universities) and Heather McCambly (Office of Community College Research and Leadership, University of Illinois) will present “‘And’ (not ‘or’): Strengthening LGBTQ Students’ Integration on Campus through Intersectional Practice” on Thursday, May 28, 8:30–10:00 a.m. at the 28th Annual National Conference on Race & Ethnicity in American Higher Education. The session will share research and explore practices that support LGBTQ students’ integration on campus through their multidimensional identities (race, ethnicity, gender, class, religion, nationality, and citizenship). The presenters will discuss national findings from an original research study that captures self-reported educational practices and perceptions of campus practitioners and faculty differently committed to serving students’ intersectional identities.

If you cannot attend the session, but are interested in participating in the presenters’ ongoing research, their national survey is still open. Visit http://bit.ly/1IenBVx to participate in the 10–15 minute survey and share your experiences.

Newsletter Submissions

BTtoP created this newsletter to highlight the good work of grantee campuses that have been involved with us as a Project over the last twelve years. We are excited to share your campus story—and encourage you to submit pieces to appear as Campus Highlights or small bits of news to appear in our In Brief section. Please also feel free to forward us the good work of your colleagues or other innovations on campuses and in your communities. We look forward to hearing from you. For more information or to submit a piece electronically, please contact info@bttop.org.

Travels

Don Harward Speaks at University of Delaware and University of Maine System

BTtoP Director Don Harward recently served as a guest speaker at two institutions to which he has strong ties. The University of Delaware hosted a Celebration of Community Engagement on Monday, March 9, on the Newark campus. Harward is a former faculty member in the philosophy department at Delaware and designed and led the university’s Honors Program during his tenure on campus. The University of Maine System hosted a Community Engagement Summit, March 19-20, at the University of Southern Maine. Harward, who served as the sixth president of Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, has a strong connection to the civic engagement movement in the state. During his tenure at Bates, he worked to integrate the university into the Lewiston community; the Harward Center for Community Partnerships was opened in 2005 in recognition of his efforts.

At both events, Harward explored the theme of the ‘engaged’ university, in which the well-being of students and faculty, and of the institution and the community, are explicitly expressed as an objective, and the interdependency of the university and its communities is robustly and broadly understood as valued partners.
The Bringing Theory to Practice Project (BTtoP) is an independent national effort. It is funded by the Charles Engelhard Foundation of New York, and functions in partnership with the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) in Washington, DC.

The Charles Engelhard Foundation is a New York-based foundation whose mission focuses on projects in higher and secondary education, cultural, medical, religious, wildlife, and conservation organizations.

S. Engelhard Center is a non-profit public charitable foundation; its mission is to support projects and initiatives that affect greater and sustained commitments by educational institutions at all levels to provide effective means of addressing the intellectual, emotional, and civic development of today’s students in preparation for claiming their positive future.

Publications Available By Bringing Theory to Practice

The Civic Series
Bringing Theory to Practice’s The Civic Series is composed of five monographs that raise questions and provide perspectives on fundamental issues about the civic mission of higher education.

Civic initiatives are ongoing in democratic societies, but only some of them become papers which invigorate the intellectual climate and promote public discussion. We believe that if each successive wave of visionary thinkers were to share their boldest ideas about the civic mission of higher education, it might contribute to theory and practice.

Transforming Undergraduate Education
This resource features chapters from twenty-four scholars, educational leaders, and practitioners, as well as ten case studies of campuses that have been recipients of Bringing Theory to Practice support. Project co-founder and director Don Harward contributed Part 1 and edited the book; national evaluator Ashley Finley authored a chapter and co-edited the case studies.

For more information: www.bttop.org/resources/publications