RESEARCH BRIEFS

A Critical Policy Review of Well–Being and Equity Policy at Historically Black, Tribal, and Predominately White Colleges and Universities

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Summary

According to national survey data, Black graduates of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are more likely than Black non-HBCU graduates to be thriving in financial, purpose, and social well-being, indicating strong social support, motivation to achieve goals, and economic stability (Gallup, 2015). Likewise, Tribal College or University (TCU) alumni are two times more likely than non-TCU peers to thrive in all elements of well-being (Gallup Inc., 2019). Less known is the role that institutional policies, such as formal written text and informal discourse, might play in shaping inequitable well-being outcomes. This study explores public-facing well-being policy (e.g., broad value statements, programs, procedures, and practices) by institution type, analyzing 26 HBCUs, TCUs, and more. Study findings show varied well-being policy approaches, which suggest that how well-being is framed within the institutional mission and values, what individuals are expected to do, or give up to be well, how culture and language are integrated, and the connection to the broader community could shape inequitable differences in well-being. Practice recommendations include creating anti-racist well-being policies that integrate within the institutional mission, celebrate students' cultures, and center civic engagement.

Background

During the last decade, calls for focusing on students' well-being have increased in higher education. Researchers have noted a discourse shift in higher education from

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"wellness" to "well-being" (Travia, 2020), and while well-being and wellness are often used interchangeably, it is important to note differences among them. Well-being comes from philosophical and psychological disciplines that center on happiness and purpose, whereas wellness is a strengths-based construct that is linked to health and prevention of illness or disease (Goss, 2010). Well-being has been described as "an optimal and dynamic state that allows people to achieve their full potential," with individual well-being including the assessment of happiness and satisfaction, meeting human rights and needs, and valuable community contributions (NIRSA, NASPA, & ACPA, 2020, p. 2). As stress and distress towards well-being are highest for college students during the first semester (Bewick et al., 2010), addressing well-being needs during college transition remains critical.

Furthermore, national survey data identified differences in alumni well-being depending on where they attended college. Specifically, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) have been found to produce alumni with a higher likelihood of well-being (i.e., purpose, social, financial, community, physical) than their counterparts at predominantly White institutions (PWI's; Gallup, 2015). For example, Black graduates of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) are more likely than Black non-HBCU graduates to be thriving in financial, purpose, and social well-being, indicating strong social support, motivation to achieve goals, and economic stability (Gallup, 2015). Likewise, TCU alumni were nearly two times more likely than their non-TCU peers to thrive in all elements of well-being (Gallup Inc., 2019). Other national survey data highlight that the more marginalized identities that a student has, the lower their well-being tends to be (Brocato, 2021). These findings highlight the impact of campus experiences among academic spaces, as racial microaggressions (or indirect slights) exist in PWI academic and social spaces, and these negative experiences can have a devastating impact on sense of belonging, persistence, and, ultimately, the well-being of students of color (McGee & Stovall, 2015). Overall, quality relationships (e.g., with institutional faculty and staff and peers) and a supportive campus environment are two factors that can positively shape well-being at any institution, with racialized experiences potentially moderating the amount of effort that students can put into their academic endeavors (Quaye & Harper, 2015). Several colleges and universities have combined health equity and racial justice initiatives by including well-being goals into strategic plans and naming well-being as a primary purpose (and outcome) of higher education (Harward, 2016; National Intramural-Recreational Sports Association, 2019). Other policy efforts include using executive leadership, such as chancellors, vice presidents, chief officers, and student leaders, to message and model well-being behavior, and embed well-being into all aspects of campus culture (Amaya et al., 2019; Goss et al., 2010).

As such, the purpose of this study is to explore how well-being policy intersects with equity initiatives at public land-grant higher education institutions, including HBCUs, TCUs, and PWIs. Utilizing a qualitative critical policy review approach (Diem & Welton, 2021) with the theory of racialized organizations (Ray, 2019), this policy review also examined the nature of well-being terminology within 26 institutions to understand the nature of well-being policy, distributions of power and resources, and how student experiences are centered within policy. The guiding research question was: how do colleges and universities define and integrate well-being policy?

Research Design

This study collected data from 26 public land-grant institutions of higher education: 10 TCUs, nine HBCUs, and six PWIs (see Table 1). Public institutions were the primary focus of this analysis due to their traditional emphasis on improving the public good (Gavazzi & Gee, 2018). Policy data came from institutional websites in the form of strategic plans, annual reports, health initiatives, procedures, programs, and mission, vision, and value statements. Lastly, recent statements addressing racial injustice were analyzed for elements of well-being, wellness, and/or health disparities.

First, all data collected was read several times to generate an overall understanding. Next, I created short 3-5-word sentence codes using direct words from the data, paying special attention to the terminology choices (well-being vs. wellness). Then, I searched for specific references of well-being, wellness, and racial injustice in connections to power, agency, and resources. After determining all possible meanings for the selected data, I then organized data into themes. Table 1 provides a summary of how each institution framed their discourse (e.g., well-being as happiness or purpose, or wellness as physical health), what definitions/values guided their frameworks, and where these frameworks were structured centered on campus. (e.g., specific campus departments).

Table 1
Logistic Regression, Factors Predicting First Year Completion

Pseudonym	Type	Discourse	Definition	Structure
Circle Community College	TCU	None		
Eagle Tech College	TCU	Wellness	Healthy lifestyle choices	Wellness center, mission statement
Long State University	TCU	None		
North Point College	TCU	Well-Being	Indigenous values, harmony, balance	Core Values
Plain State University	TCU	Well-Being & Wellness	Wellness programming. Values of medicine wheel, balance	Core Values
Premier College	TCU	Well-Being	Student learning and development to ensure the well-being of Indigenous People.	Mission & value statements, and educational philosophy
River Tribal College	TCU	Well-Being	Well-being in mission goals, vision, and strategic plan	
Snow Mountain State	TCU	Well-Being	Safety, academic, physical, financial, and social needs	Course catalog (courses in self-care) & Core Value
Sovereignty Community College	TCU	None		
Turtle Island College	TCU	Well-Being & Wellness	Supporting the inherent rights of Indigenous peoples	Mission statement
North State University	PWI	Well-Being & Wellness	Wellness is the full integration of states of physical, mental, and spiritual well-being. seven dimensions of wellness	Student Affairs, Health Hub of Services
Pacific State University	PWI	Well-Being	Seven Dimensions of student well-being: physical, energy, mental, wisdom, self-actualization, financial, environmental	Individual schools/colleges, online
University of Big State	PWI	Well-Being	Conditions for well-being: social connectedness, mindfulness, growth mindset, resilience, gratitude, inclusivity, self-compassion, and life purpose.	Well-being institute and Guidebook for well-being
University of Many Lakes	PWI	Well-Being & Wellness	Specific well-being definition. Unit/Initiative solely devoted to well-being. Extensive wellness programs	Student Affairs, stand-alone initiatives
University of Open Fields	PWI	Well-Being & Wellness	Eight dimensions of wellness	Wellness center mission statement
University of the Southwest	PWI	Well-Being & Wellness	Structural and ecological approaches to well-being. Place and well-being	

Pseudonym	Type	Discourse	Definition	Structure
Achievement University	HBCU	Wellness	Wellness programs designed to encourage behaviors to improve well-being. Mental health awareness week	Mission Statement
Bridge State University	HBCU	None		
Historical State University	HBCU	None		
Ocean State University	HBCU	None		
Paradise A & M University	HBCU	Wellness		Individual schools/colleges
Renaissance University	HBCU	Wellness	Five Dimensions of wellness: physical, emotional, social, professional, and spiritual	Health Center
Southeast A & T University	HBCU	None		
Sunshine A & M	HBCU	Wellness	Wellness programming, Initiatives for community health disparities	Core Values
University of Deep South	HBCU	Wellness & Well-Being	Seven Dimensions of well-being (Academic, Career, Financial, Psychological, Physical, Social, Spiritual	Student Affairs, Institutional core values
University of Plain State	HBCU	Wellness	Wellness minor	Student programming

Findings

Study findings revealed varying approaches to well-being policy and its connection to racial equity. Formal written well-being policies were largely absent on most HBCU websites, although there was a strong emphasis on wellness initiatives that focused on addressing racial justice through improving physical health outcomes in Black communities. Meanwhile, TCUs embedded collective well-being text directly into their institutional mission and value statements and considered education and racial justice to be a direct result of embracing and reclaiming Indigenous culture and language. PWIs included multiple well-being and wellness policy discourses and resources, although these initiatives were often not connected explicitly to the institutional mission, but rather a means to enhance student learning and retention. Additional discussion about these themes and related findings are discussed in the subsequent sections.

HBCUs: Relational Wellness Approaches to Health Inequity

HBCU policy text focused on wellness and physical health, specifically addressing health disparities in Black communities.

Physical and emotional health and safety were frequently co-occurring website text, which suggested that these were priorities for institutions. Two of the institutions, Achievement University and Southern Agricultural & Technical University (all institutional names are pseudonyms), included elements of wellness as service to others. Achievement University stressed that its mission has always been about "service to people, and not education for education's sake".

Likewise, Southern A&T University wrote on the value of relevance (being closely connected) to meet the basic needs of the community and improve the quality of life of Black communities. This discourse explicitly links the success of educational experiences in proportion to addressing the everyday needs of the Black community. This collective and relational approach also shifts power directly in the hands of students who are seeking education to improve Black existence in America. Well-being (as happiness, purpose, balance) may be difficult to achieve when Black bodies suffer due to systemic and intentional neglect and malign. In response, HBCUs focus on physical health aligns resources and agency in a manner that is both pragmatic and tangible.

TCUs: Culturally Relevant Well–Being Policy

Many TCUs embed principles of well-being within their core values. Six out of 10 TCUs integrated well-being and balance directly into their institutional missions, visions, values, and goal statements. For example, North Point College listed traditional Indigenous values such as: Qiksiksrautiqaġniq Iñuuniaġvigmun (Respect for Nature), Qiñuiññiq – (Humility), Ukpiqqutiqaġniq (Spirituality,) and Nagliktuutiqaġniq (Compassion). As their mission is to "build strong communities through education and training," this suggested that well-being as the balance of nature, people, and resources is an expected outcome of higher education.

Additionally, among policy materials, there was no separation between the values of the Indigenous community and the values of the college. For example, the goal of the North Point was not to build productive citizens but whole communities, threading a collectivist approach to well-being and wellness that matches that of the community. This assumed that it is through Indigenous culture and language that well-being is achieved and not despite it. These policy approaches deliberately embedded student and community culture in the processes of the institution and allowed individuals to come as they are, with no need for assimilation. This messaging can be valuable for students who may implicitly learn that there is something wrong with their culture or that they need to change to be successful.

Another example of an institution demonstrating a culturally relevant well-being policy was Premier College, whose mission statement identified the well-being of Indigenous people as its primary objective. Additionally, this College's educational philosophy placed Indigenous life in harmony with the natural world and the universe. The concept of harmony and balance again played a leading role in conveying the college's intention of where and how well-being should exist. It is this combination of culture-affirming Indigeneity and well-being that created conditions where student agency and well-being might flourish.

PWIs: Abundance of Well–Being and Wellness

All six PWI websites contained extensive text on wellness and well-being, with multiple departments providing separate and sometimes disconnected well-being initiatives, definitions, and sub-definitions (e.g., financial wellness, emotional wellness, etc.). Additionally, three PWIs framed well-being and wellness within a socio-ecological approach that considered how policies, structures, and environments shape well-being on campus. While HBCUs and TCUs utilized circular and collective conceptions of well-being and wellness, PWI discourse around well-being presented a linear and transactional approach (e.g., exercise + counseling + sleep = well-being). Furthermore, unlike TCUs and HBCUs, well-being discourse was not located within PWI mission statements but as standalone policy initiatives.

On the surface, the PWI websites were more saturated with well-being policy but often did not situate within a socio-historical context to frame why certain student populations and communities were denied the opportunity to be well. Given research about the experiences of students of color on PWI campuses, this suggests that the PWI policy of well-being maybe be decoupled from practice or lived experience of well-being. This racialized misalignment between policy and practice (Ray, 2019) suggests that PWI well-being policy may be a reactive and aspirational response to recent student experiences and demands and not fully representative of all students' day-to-day experiences. As students of color are more likely to have unmet mental health needs and disinclined to utilize campus resources and services (Anderson, 2018), well-being policy that solely prioritizes individual help-seeking behavior may not fully address inequitable outcomes, especially for students with marginalized identities.

Overall, findings from this study suggested that the differences in student well-being experiences could connect to how well-being is framed within institutional mission and values, what individuals are required to do (or give up) to be well, how culture and language are integrated, and how such elements are connected to the broader community. To reiterate, socio-ecological well-being and wellness content and resources saturate PWI websites but are not explicitly connected to the institutional mission and values or ongoing issues of racial injustice. For HBCUs and TCUs, well-being and wellness were framed as a direct outcome of education and extension of the surrounding community, achieved by embracing one's culture, heritage, and language. This is an alternative depiction from traditional college student integration models that imply that students should assimilate into dominant cultures to be successful (Tinto, 1993). The Indigenous well-being model did not ask students to give up parts of their culture but rather to remember and embrace it. Likewise, racial injustice at Tribal Colleges was not simply a problem to be solved but was framed as a collective issue in which all suffer at the hands of racism and hate. See Figure 1 for an example of how TCUs illustrated such framing.
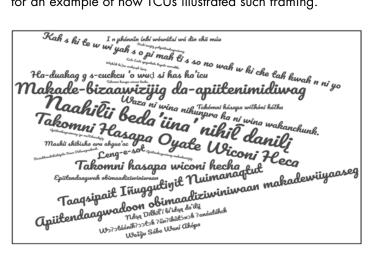

Figure 1 "Black Lives Matter" translated in 24 Indigenous languages. Source: Adapted from Life is Sacred: A Statement of the Nation's Tribal Colleges and Universities. (2020).

Implications and Recommendations

HBCUs, TCUs, and PWIs have different approaches to well-being policy, which may influence the level of agency that students feel and guide everyday behavior and interactions. As such, below are policy recommendations for all colleges and universities to consider:

1. It is important for institutions to delineate between wellness and well-being and to frame consistent messages across the institution from a culturally sustaining philosophy that embeds student culture into the processes of the institution (D'Andrea Martínez, 2021). The inter-association well-being definition created by the National Intermural-Recreational Sports Association, the National Association for Student Personnel Administrators, and the American College Health Association is an exemplar model for institutions to adopt or modify (NIRSA, NASPA, & ACHA, 2020).

2. Practitioners can reflect on their work and interactions with students while considering how well-being connects to the institutional mission, vision, and values. If no connection exists, these individuals can advocate for formal revision and inclusion of well-being as a direct goal of higher education.

3. Written well-being policy can provide guidance, support, intention, and accountability for those striving towards well-being. Additionally, such policies can work to sustain effective practices and acknowledge key actors and stakeholders (Kyser et al., 2016). The Okanagan charter (2015) is a collective call-to-action and vision for transforming all institutions of higher education into health-promoting colleges & universities. It is an exemplar policy and call-to-action, as it provides institutions with a common language, principles, and socio-ecological frameworks for embedding health and well-being in all aspects of campus culture, including collective and community well-being perspectives

4. It is important for leaders and institutional staff to engage in critical reflection and to consider practices as well as written policy. Sarah Diem and Anjalé Welton (2020) provided an excellent anti-racist policy audit protocol review which may be a useful resource for educational leaders to equitably implement and assess policy. Some guiding questions for leaders to consider from Diem and Welton's work include: "What are the intentions of the policy," "How do the policy intentions align with what happens on the ground in day-to-day practice," and "Who benefits from the policy and who is negatively affected?"

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