Institutional factors that positively impact first-year students' sense of well-being

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study conducted at a single institution in the Midwest examines how institutional context and environment impact college students' sense of well-being. Twenty seven first-year students participated in one to two hour, in-depth interviews where they talked about their first year experiences, their concepts of well-being, and how campus experiences positively impacted their well-being. Interviews were transcribed and narratives were coded and analyzed using Strange and Banning's (2001) model of campus environments to consider how safety, involvement, inclusion, and community positively impact well-being.

Findings suggest that being involved with peers, faculty, and resident assistants; being included in a diverse community and learning from diverse others' beliefs and worldviews; and taking part in dynamic classrooms and learning experiences that build a sense of community; positively impact well-being. Half of participants also talked about how the physical beauty of campus, and use of outdoor space, also positively impacted their sense of well-being. Overall findings are key indicators of how resources could be allocated for first year initiatives as well as possible directions for future research on student well-being.

Keywords: qualitative, case study, first-year students, well-being, campus environment

INTRODUCTION

In the second half of the twentieth century researchers in the discipline of psychology have broadened their focus from understanding and studying negative emotional states such as depression to also include understanding and measuring well-being and happiness (Van Horn, 2007). This movement in psychology has also found its way into the realm of higher education and the study of college students and their well-being. For instance, a recent article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Carlson, May 16, 2014) cited that a new survey of more than 30,000 college graduates links employment, engagement in work, and overall well-being to the impact caring professors can have on their students.

Well-being in the literature is defined in many ways, with varying dimensions. For the purposes of this study, well-being is defined as a multidimensional construct that includes the absence of negative conditions and the promotion of positive ones; from a wellness perspective this construct involves giving optimal care to your physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual self which includes engagement with others as well as optimum environments that support these factors (Travis & Ryan, 2004). Regardless of the varied definitions of well-being, most focus on the dimensionality of being human and consider, minimally, the physical, psychological, and spiritual aspects of persons. Well-being is an important topic to understand among today's college population because it may be linked to better college retention and graduation rates. Certainly these rates are an issue of importance on campuses nationwide since college dropout rates still hover around 43% with the six year graduation rate remaining around 57 % at public, 4-year institutions. (National Center for Education Statistics, 2014) College dropout is caused by many factors; however, mental health issues can be a major hindrance to college success and completion. Depression, one of the reasons students drop out of college, is linked to stress, lack of exercise, poor nutritional and sleep habits, and financial concerns to name a few; these factors are related to a less positive state of being. More recent statistics reveal that almost one in four college students suffer from some form of mental illness, including depression or anxiety (Kerr, 2012) and these students are far more likely to engage in binge drinking, taking drugs, or engaging in risky sexual behavior. In addition to mental health issues, other factors may deter from college completion. An earlier report from the University of Minnesota (2007) indicates from a survey of 10,000 students that roughly thirty eight percent of the sample were overweight or considered obese, thirty percent reported excessive internet or computer use linked to lower academic performance, along with over thirty five percent reporting taking part in high risk drinking.

A comprehensive review of the literature on college students and well-being found that from the approximate years 1990-2013 97 studies were conducted related to college students and well-being. The majority of studies, more than 70%, concentrate in areas of psychological studies -- social, emotional, or subjective psychology; the least studied areas of college student well-being include physical and spiritual aspects of student life and the role of college engagement – in reviewing the literature, only a handful of studies considered these areas. Because college engagement or involvement is related to many positive factors such as deeper learning (Chickering and Gamson, 1987) and potentially greater growth and change across areas like cognitive, moral, and identity development (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) it is worthy to consider how undergraduate students' engagement within a dynamic campus environment may promote well-being.

CONCEPTUAL FRAME

This study uses Strange and Banning's model of dynamic campus learning (Strange & Banning, 2001) environment as a lens to understand how students talk about institutional context when they discuss their own well-being. The model conceptualizes four aspects of campus environments which promote or impact learning: safety, involvement, community, and inclusion. These four aspects are aligned with Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of human needs (1968) which posits that all humans have basic needs of safety and shelter, needs of love and belonging, and a higher level need to actualize one's potential. As part of a dynamic learning environment Strange and Banning (2001) argue that human environments all have the following key components that "serve to prod, bend, and shape behaviors" (p. 5). These include:

- Physical condition, design, and layout
- Characteristics of the people who inhabit them
- Organizational structures related to their purposes and goals
- Inhabitants' collective perceptions or constructions of the context and culture of the setting (Strange and Banning, 2001, p. 5)

For example, physical components may contain both natural and man- made campus features such as architecture, landscape, terrain, use of space, or even lighting of classrooms. Constructions of campus environments may impact how students perceive a setting, such as its overall climate or culture and the general characteristics of the people within the environment (Strange & Banning, 2001, as found in Komives, Dudley, Woodward, & associates, 2003) as well as how the organizational structure is perceived.

LITERATURE REVIEW

While a relatively comprehensive body of literature considers college student well-being from multiple factors such as physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological aspects, for the purposes of this case study the literature will be delimited to a discussion of how student engagement within the college environment influences student well-being. Engagement can be defined as the degree to which students apply effort and involve themselves academically, extracurricularly, intrapersonally and interpersonally in their college lives (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Because this current study examines how students' experiences within the college setting impact their well-being, the engagement literature is most salient to the discussion of student experiences.

College Engagement/Impact and Well-Being

More than 150 studies were reviewed relative to college student well-being; however only 14 studies were found that fall under the category of college engagement and well-being ranging from student athletes' engagement in college to how liberal arts experiences impact engagement. Three broad categories from the 14 studies emerged as: well-being related to having an athletic or sport identity in college (Miller & Hoffman, 2009; Gilgunn, 2010) civic engagement and its impact on well- being (Flores, Crosby-Currie, & Zimmerman, 2007; Flanagan & Bundick, 2011; Swaner, 2007; Bowman, Brandenberger, Lapsley, Hill, & Quaranto, 2010), and types of learning experiences or environments in college that impact well-being

(Low, 2011; Steele & Fullagar, 2009; Bowman, 2010; Boazman & Sayler, 2011; Seifert, Goodman, Lindsay, Jorgensen, Wolniak, Pascarella, & Blaich, 2008).

Miller and Hoffman (2009) and Gilgunn (2010) both examined how athletics can impact the outcome of well-being. Miller and Hoffman surveyed 791 students examining relationships among athletic involvement and gender, depression, and suicidal behavior. Participation in a team sport and having an athletic identity were associated with lower depression levels and lower risk of suicide attempt. However, having a strong "jock" identity was associated with lower well-being and elevated health risk behaviors and higher risk of attempted suicide. Gilgunn's qualitative study of Canadian student-athletes in the U.S. found that even though being a student athlete is very demanding it has many distinctions that impact well-being in a positive way, such as increased physical health and benefits of the social aspects of team membership.

Four studies examined the role of civic engagement during college and its impact on student well-being. Flores, Crosby-Currie, and Zimmerman studied (2007) 30 student participants in a living learning community (LLC) whose focus was on community and citizenship. Findings indicated that LLC students were more likely to be engaged in civic learning and civic matters, academic and co-curricular activities, collaborate more with peers and faculty, drink less alcohol, take part less in binge drinking, and believe the campus had a supportive environment. No notable changes were found in mental well-being. Interestingly, LLC students also demonstrated lower levels of leadership, empathy, and self -confidence compared to non LLC students. Flanagan and Bundick's (2011) review of research on civic engagement in college students found that volunteerism is linked with indicators of well-being such as optimism, hope and self-efficacy. Well-being in terms of psychological health was linked to relationships and responsibility towards others rather than to freedom and independence. Swaner's review of research literature (2007) also indicates positive links between civic engagement, engaged learning, and well-being in college students. A longitudinal study of 416 students examined effects of service learning during college and post-college years (Bowman, Brandenberger, Lapsley, Hill, and Quaranto, 2010); volunteering and service learning had positive indirect effects on aspects of well-being including: personal growth, life purpose, environment mastery, life satisfaction, positive attitudes, and values.

In six separate studies, college engagement and its effects on well-being was considered from the dimensions of engaged learning, programming impact, course impact, and quality of college life. Low's (2011) and Steele and Fullagar's (2009) studies both considered how student engagement in academic experiences impacts well-being. Low's study examined associations between positive mental health, depression, and engaging learning experiences among 428 first year students at a single institution. Students completed measures of depression, mental health, substance abuse, and engagement. Alcohol use and binge drinking was not clearly associated with mental health; however student engagement showed an association with mental well-being. Steele and Fullagar's (2009) study looked at a sample of 137 college students which considered how engaging experiences in college coursework led to well-being outcomes. Survey findings indicated that having engaging academic experiences in coursework positively impacted both psychological well-being and physical health; findings also indicated that academic work should be structured to be clear, provide autonomy, and provide regular and ample feedback to promote student engagement and overall well-being. Bowman's (2010) multi-institution study of the impact of diversity courses on well-being found that students in college who take two or more diversity courses show significant gains in well-being and orientation to diversity; gains varied by race, income, and gender. In a study conducted by Boazman & Sayler (2011), students taking

part in an early –college program reported greater global life satisfaction than same age peers-- showing elevated levels of satisfaction in achievement, standard of living, safety, future security, and higher levels of general self-efficacy. Finally, a study of the effects of liberal arts experiences on specific outcomes found that institutional ethos such as the valuing of the intellectual arts, high faculty and student interaction, and high expectations, positively impacts the lived experiences of students and predicts development of outcomes of intercultural effectiveness, lifelong learning, leadership, and well-being (Seifert, Goodman, Lindsay, Jorgensen, Wolniak, Pascarella, & Blaich, 2008).

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study looks at the concept of well-being as it intersects within a campus environment. The main research questions guided this case study:

1) How do undergraduate students talk about their well-being relative to their engagement within campus environmental influences of safety, inclusion, involvement, and community?
2) Among the campus environmental influences of safety, inclusion, involvement, and community, which aspects of campus environments do students discuss most frequently or see as the most impactful?
3) What can we learn from how students talk about well-being relative to their engagement with campus environmental influences?

CONTEXT OF THE CASE

The case study is of a single, comprehensive, open access, urban, research university in the Midwest with a student population made up of both commuter and residential students who primarily come from the local region and surrounding Midwest states. The student body consists of majority White students, 25 % ethnic minorities, and 19 % international students (split between graduate and undergraduate students); faculty and staff closely mirror the student body in demographic makeup. Most students tend to come from the middle class when characterized socio-economically with a fair number of students also characterized as first generation students. The university has a particular focus on medicine, the sciences, and engineering. The institution has been noted for its physical beauty in terms of its gothic style architecture and its use of physical space and outdoor space; all buildings are rendered in limestone, giving the campus a feeling of architectural cohesiveness. In most months of the year the outdoor mall area is readily populated with students, faculty, and staff enjoying the outdoor space. In colder months the Student Union draws the same groups indoors with its restaurants, student clubs and organizations, and many community seating areas.

Situated on the eastern side of the Midwest, this campus has a typical bureaucratic, hierarchical leadership structure with the majority of upper administration made up of older, white, males. The campus has not been immune to financial obstacles as a result of the economic downturn that began in the U.S. around 2008; the latest academic year budget revealed a shortfall of several million dollars with further concerns of declining enrollments in some of the colleges, along with a first year retention rate that hovers around 68%. In recent years the university has seen rather dramatic administrative cuts, and changes, with a great deal of

movement among both sides of academic and student affairs. In the past academic year faculty workloads have also increased, which is cause for grumbling among faculty ranks.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The primary aim of this study is to examine and understand how students talk about their well-being relative to the positive influences promoted by a dynamic campus environment (Strange & Banning, 2001) which is conceptualized as an environment that promotes safety, involvement, inclusion, and community. The secondary aim of this study is to understand specifically what campus environmental influences are most impactful on student well-being.

METHOD OF INQUIRY

This study uses a qualitative, case study approach to understand how institutional context impacts student well-being and to understand what experiences students talk about relative to well-being. The "how" and "what" questions are typical of qualitative design and lend themselves best to understanding the nuances of a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). A case study approach is also used to understand how the institution itself, or the case, impacts students' experiences. This case is bounded by space and time as it takes place at a single institution and considers only interview data from students' first year experiences. Typical of case study method (Creswell, 1998) findings will be considered from the particulars of the bounded system. Lessons learned from the case will also be discussed.

Limitations

This research is limited because of its qualitative and case study method. Because this focuses on students at a single institution in the Midwest findings may not generalize to broader populations in other geographic regions. Because the case is bounded by space and time findings, it must be understood from a point in time, rather than longitudinally.

Data Sources

First year students were recruited from two residence halls at a Midwestern campus. Criteria for participation included being over the age of 17 and completing their second semester in spring 2011. Students were told they would be interviewed once each year for the following 4-5 years and they would be paid $25 cash for each interview. In total, 35 first year students were recruited; 27 students agreed to be interviewed. The majority were white, female, heterosexual, and identified as Christian or agnostic. The sample included five African American students, and three biracial students. One student self -identified as gay. Participants represented an equal mix of urban, suburban, and rural areas.

Data collection occurred during spring semester 2011. Students were interviewed in the researcher's office. Each interview was digitally recorded and followed a protocol of open ended and semi structured questions such as, "Can you describe to me what your first year here has been like for you?" and "Can you tell me about experiences at this university this year that have impacted your well-being both positively and negatively?" Interviews lasted an average of one – one and a half hours. Each interview was transcribed; printed transcriptions resulted in

approximately 250 pages of single spaced narrative. Research participants were given the opportunity to read their own transcribed interview in the event in order to verify the accuracy of the data.

Data Analysis

Transcribed narratives were read several times for general understanding then hand coded using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) of categorical reduction into broader thematic units. This categorical reduction was simplified using Strange and Banning's (2001) model of campus environments, whereby the data was categorized according to the four components of dynamic campus environments: safety, involvement, inclusion, and community. Thus, deductive reasoning was used as a means to place units of meaning into pre-identified categories; moving from the general to specific.

Trustworthiness

To ensure trustworthiness of the data the researcher fully explained the design and method of the study so that it may be replicated as it was initially carried out (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), thus allowing for dependability. Member checks were also used, along with reflexive journaling and peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) in order to maximize credibility of data and findings. Confirmability is also ensured because individual quotes can be traced to original digital recordings and transcribed narrative and findings are generated from the ideas of the informants and not of the researcher (Shenton, 2004). And finally, by providing a rich description (Gertz 1973) of the campus environment as well as of the process of data collection and participant recruitment, the reader can understand how the findings may be transferable to their own educational setting (Glesne,1999).

FINDINGS

For ease of discussion, the results have been framed using Strange and Banning's (2001) four part model of dynamic campus environments: safety, involvement, inclusion, and community. Each of the four categories then includes subcategories that emerged from the research which further highlight nuances within the broad categories. For instance, under the category of inclusion students discuss religious diversity, diversity of thought, and diversity in sexual orientation, to name a few. Because there was a large amount of narrative data, only selected portions of students' discussions are used to highlight or exemplify key findings. The most salient material was chosen to best exemplify each category.

Safety

Safety is defined as the condition having a safe campus environment free of physical or mental threat. It also includes meeting basic human needs of food and shelter. Of the four categories of Strange and Banning's model (2001) the topic of safety did not emerge as a salient category or theme in terms of how students talked about their experiences relative to well-being. If this finding is interpreted in a positive light one may assume that (because students did not talk about their basic needs not being met or about feeling physically or mentally threatened)

student's safety needs are being met in a positive way. On the other hand, it may also be interpreted from another possible lens which is that students only focused on the positive impacts on their well – being and did not discuss those points that negatively impacted their well-being from a safety perspective. This lack of a finding may be a positive indicator that overall students felt safe on this campus and this sense of safety tended to be a part of their given experience rather than viewed as a topic of concern.

Involvement

Involvement is defined as engaging students in the organization where they learn through challenge and risk taking (Strange & Banning, 2001). Astin (1984) also talks about involvement as a function of the amount of personal energy and time put into academic endeavors, whether they are curricular or co-curricular in nature. Participants talked often about the positive impact of involvement on their well-being. Their discussion ranged broadly from involvement with faculty, peers, Greek life, residence life, academics, and involvement in the physical space of campus. Involvement was seen not only as fun, but also as further opportunities to learn about new topics, to learn about others, or to learn about the self.

Involvement with faculty.

Surprisingly, involvement with faculty was a theme that resonated throughout the interviews with first-year students. Allie and Charles talked about experiences with favorite instructors and the positive impact this had on their sense of self efficacy. Allie said,

> One of my favorite teachers [was] my comp teacher and I always felt like I struggled with writing and stuff but she built up my confidence and made me feel like I could write really good papers. I got an A in her class and she is just awesome. When I see her on campus she's like 'Hey Allie what's up?!'--she still remembers me and talks to me. She was just, a really good teacher.

Charles iterated the same sentiment, but in a different way, stating,

> I would say the best positive impact on my well- being has been showing up to office hours for my math teacher this semester. He showed the concern that I was taking the class over again and he wants to see me be successful. It was encouraging to see someone do that. He told me 'if you want to reach your goals you will have to work harder and there are people that want to help you with that you just have to find them.'

Both Allie and Charles talked about the importance of having faculty who seemed to truly care about them, cared about their lives, and encouraged them along their educational pathways. Care, support, and encouragement were key elements students talked about relative to involvement with faculty.

Involvement with peers.

Peers were frequently discussed in terms of positive involvement in the life of campus and as an important influence on well-being. One male student, Jason, talked about the value of peer help/mentoring as well as using peers as a gauge to measure the self against when he revealed,

> We have a peer mentor on our floor and he will be the first to ask if he needs to expand his office hours if we need help. Anytime I need help with chemistry he will help me out. I also think just meeting people here is good for my well-being. I think it's a good life experience to come somewhere brand new where you don't know anyone. Interacting with others and stuff to have a fresh start to better deliver who you are to other people, judge where you are at socially.

Avery talked about the positive impact of peer involvement through her sorority and the social role modeling of a sorority sister in particular saying,

> Kappa Delta [pause] like I don't know what I would be doing without it. I love it. It's gotten me more involved on campus. A girl in my sorority [pause]we are best friends now. She is really involved on campus--she's in student government, on student honors council, and I think she just pushes me to get more involved …She gets good grades and stuff and I almost like not idolize her, but I respect her and I aspire to be like her.

In both instances the above students discussed the importance of involvement with peers—those who can act as a positive social role model or mentor. It was evident from interviews that first-year students, in particular, focused on how involvement with peers helped them navigate the new territory of the college environment and also helped them understand themselves better through social comparison.

Involvement in residence life.

Interestingly, half of the participants talked about residence life involvement and the impact or influence Resident Assistants had on their lives. There were two students whose responses are worth noting because they point out the very positive and important influence Resident Assistants can have on their students' well-being.
Darius said,

> Also, my RAs are great, it is one of the main reasons our floor is so close because of them. It's a coed floor and its fun. They are just really outgoing and they force you to do stuff like go to floor dinners and they go around to each individual door and make you come out and stuff and talk to them. It's a lot of fun they are always involved.

Another student, Andre, also talked about the positive influence of his RA when he said,

> I think my floor [in his residence hall] is a good one. We are one of the three social floors. Like, I have gone to other floors and I know people who don't even know the name of the people next to them and they don't talk at all. Our doors are constantly open and we are always running around talking to each other. Because we have a really cool RA he is always encouraging us to go talk to each other and he is always talking to us and hanging out with us.

Again, from an involvement perspective, one can see that encouragement and care are important ingredients to get students involved and engaged in the campus environment, and this positively contributed to their overall well-being.

Involvement with physical aspects of the campus environment.

More than one-third of the participants talked about involvement in campus activities, along with enjoying physical aspects of the campus environment. The physical beauty of the campus space was frequently noted as having a very positive impact on well-being.

Natalie exemplified this nicely stating,

> I'm involved in the outdoor wilderness club here and we took a trip over fall break to West Virginia for a white water rafting trip. It was such a great experience cause like I've never had the opportunity to do that. Since I am part of the outdoor club I love being outside and I love the university. I love all the green areas, and the mall and the rooftop garden. I think it is such a pretty campus.

Jason indicated that on days of nice weather he simply enjoyed walking around campus with a group of friends and enjoying the outdoor space. He commented, "It's just a pretty campus to be on, especially on nice days…and the mall is a good space to be in and to see people, plus it's pretty". It seems a fair assumption given the above evidence, that capital spent on beautifying campus and making usable, student-friendly space.

Inclusion

Inclusion can be viewed in tandem with safety, as students must feel safe and free of threat in order to feel a sense of being included or belongingness. Inclusion was talked about in the sense of being engaged or involved in the process of widening beliefs, or activities, to include other viewpoints different from one's own or to include others who are outwardly different from one's self. The concept of inclusion covered a broad range of people, religious activities, beliefs, and diversity in various forms.

Inclusion in religious activities

Almost half of the students talked about their interest in learning about others' backgrounds, and this was especially true pertaining to religious beliefs and practices. Students discussed the importance of feeling included for their own beliefs yet also trying to include, and incorporate, other religious views into their mental models of the world.

> Kendra said,
> I joined this group, it's a non-denominational religious group… I'm from a Catholic background so it is really cool seeing a different way of worshipping. Some people that come here aren't even sure they believe in God, which is what I like cause there are some people that have habits that you would not think of as religious, but it is very diverse and I love that.

Emelia also talked about religious diversity when she said,

> I feel like campus is real diverse so not only like skin color or ethnicity but different religions like Muslim and Jewish …I have become more open minded since I have gotten here. I just think there are a lot of opportunities here where you can get yourself out there and get involved with people that are different than you. It opens your mind more I think.

Both young women talked about inclusion in a diverse campus environment and how their experiences with others different from themselves positively impacted their well-being. One might be quick to assume that learning about other worldviews very different than one's own may cause disequilibrium and therefore have a negative impact on well-being. However, in talking to students it was clear that this was not the case.

Inclusion with diverse peoples

Similar to discussions about diverse religious views, students mentioned that learning from others who held different world views, or ideas, had a positive impact on their well-being in general. Kendra talked about the importance of communicating with people who have diverse thoughts and ideas saying,

I think also I like [the school] in general um [long pause] because I came from such a small school that wasn't a whole lot of diversity so it's just, um--even when I disagree with people it's just nice, um, to see both sides now, of things. Because before I was just always right about everything and this was how it was supposed to be, and when you see people who come from different backgrounds and stuff I mean [long pause] you still may not agree but you can still see where they are coming from. So I feel like diversity has been really good for me.

One young man, Cooper, who revealed to me in his interview that he was gay, talked about the importance of diversity from having an LGBTQ support system when he said,

With [LGBTQ group] you have people that have similar experiences growing up its like strength in numbers. We all hang out; we don't have to be at a meeting to hang out… and our LGBT culture lady also has a partner. It's easier to talk to her and she is more influential because she has gone through the same stuff we have gone through. Now she is trying to help people, it's a positive thing.

From this young man's perspective it was clear that being included in a support system was of great importance to him as he did not feel a part of the majority. His use of the words "strength in numbers" is a clear indicator that he feels that sense of belongingness in his LGBTQ group and because of that it positively impacted his well-being.

Inclusion with other beliefs

About one-third of the students talked about the importance of including other worldviews in one's mental model as a way to both question personal beliefs, or to further confirm those beliefs. Jason talked about how his own views began to change as he experienced views different from his own saying,

I have met people who have different views than me because in my town it's really small and conservative, everyone thinks the same way. Coming here there is a lot more diversity... In my town it is very Christian. Here I have talked to people who don't believe in God at all and that was a big shock. I believe personally it's just good to have those open minded conversations with people…to make you think about your own beliefs. Now, I guess I question myself more.

Community

Strange and Banning define community (2001) as fitting into Maslow's (1968) highest point on the hierarchy where students move toward self- actualization through becoming participating members in a community ; this concept means the students are involved members, engaged in meaningful and purposeful activities. Students talked about community frequently within the framework of teaching and learning. That is, good teaching fostered a sense of community in

these students' lives. Establishing a sense of community also came as a byproduct of building friendships and networking with peers.

Ariel talked about the sense of engagement she felt in the community of a Spanish class when she stated,

> And then I had my Spanish professor and I always hated Spanish [pause] but I came here and she actually made it great … I want to go to Spain with her this summer. She just opened my eyes to the culture. She was all over the place in her teaching, but still organized. In her class I was always so excited to go and so pumped. There was no specific way she taught it was just how excited she was that made you excited! In her class I felt like I was a part of something.

Another student, Cameron, shared her sense of engagement with her sorority and one class, in particular by saying,

> My sorority and the whole recruitment process, I will never forget. They are not only my friends but my sisters. I also had one really good class this year it was a smaller class and I feel it was like really--we were just kind of tight. We all got the opportunity to talk as a group and converse more than in my other classes, where the teacher just stands there and lectures. We had round tables where we would read and bounce ideas off each other.

Whitney also commented positively about one of her experiences with a particular class, and with being able to talk to professors in generalsaying,

> One of my favorite classes I am taking is my disabilities class. I love going every day. It is not something where you have to sit down and listen to a lecture. It is really interactive. I guess at the beginning of the semester I didn't connect with any of my professors. This semester I really love being able to go up and talk to my professors. I am in a lot smaller classes. So being close with my professors is something I really like.

All three of the above discussions provide evidence that a sense of community and being involved in community is very important to students' overall engagement within the college environment and sense of well-being. This sense of community may be fostered in various ways; in particular students talked about this relative to building community with peers and having professors that actively sought to build a sense of community in their own classrooms.

DISCUSSION

It is important to discuss the above findings situated within what we know in the research literature base. It is noteworthy that of more than 150 studies reviewed, relative to college student well-being, less than 10 % of the studies considered how students' engagement on campus, or within the campus environment, can impact their well-being. However, the little research that does exist aligns with, and supports, the current findings from this study.

The key finding from this study is that personal engagement on campus, and within the total environment of campus, does matter. And more importantly, engagement positively impacts reported well-being. The majority of the 27 students in this study talked about how engaging experiences on campus positively impacted their well-being. These experiences ranged from 1.) expressing positive feelings for feeling a part of an inclusive and diverse community, 2.) for being intellectually and emotionally engaged within dynamic and caring classroom environments, 3.) for being engaged intellectually in a diverse environment with other students who had different faith beliefs or general world views, 4) for being engaged in the caring

communities of residence life and more specifically with resident assistants, 5) and for being engaged in the aesthetically appealing physical space of campus.

More than half of the students talked very positively about their involvement and engagement with others who were ethnically, socioeconomically, intellectually, or religiously diverse. Meeting and talking with other students who were from different regions, who had varied ethnic backgrounds, or who held different religious views than their own created impactful experiences. In Bowman's study (2010), the findings support this idea that diversity experiences positively impact well-being; while the study examined impact of taking diversity courses, rather than simply interacting with diverse others, it did find that taking two or more diversity courses led to gains in well-being and a positive orientation to diversity experiences. It would be interesting to know more about the diversity curriculum in Bowman's study. One of the findings in the current study indicated that students talked very positively about engaging intellectually with students who held different world views or faith beliefs, suggesting the positive impact on well-being. The finding seemed somewhat paradoxical since one might assume that engaging with others with very different world views may cause discomfort or disequilibrium in personal belief systems. However, this did not appear to be the case in this study.

Another key finding from the current study indicated that students value learning opportunities in the classroom that engage them intellectually, emotionally, and that build a larger sense of shared community. Faculty members would benefit from knowing that student well-being is positively impacted by care that faculty show both in the community they build within the classroom and in the relationships they build with students outside of the classroom-- whether through advising appointments, informal or formal mentoring, or simply taking the time to talk to students on campus when they see them. Students want and need encouragement, and want to know they are cared about as people, not simply as a student on a classroom roster.

Several studies point to the positive influence engaging academic experiences have on student well-being. Low (2011), Steele and Fullager (2009) and Seifert et al (2008) found that different types of engaging academic experiences have positive influence on physical and mental well-being whether it is through coursework and classroom experiences or through frequent faculty and student interaction. Further research is warranted which considers the nature of classroom experiences from a phenomenological perspective as well as considers types of classroom experiences that may have greater impact on well-being.

Similarly, findings from this study suggest that students benefit from engaging in the community of residence life and in particular, with Resident Assistants who promote a positive community in their buildings, halls, on their floors, and even with students and staff in other residence halls. Although the research literature does not address the important role of Resident Assistants in the promotion of student well-being it does address civic engagement within living learning communities (LLC). A 2007 study (Flores, Crosby-Currie, and Zimmerman) found that LLC students were more likely to be engaged in civic matters and in academic and co-curricular activities, collaborate more with faculty and peers, and report that the campus had a supportive environment. However, no positive impact was noted on mental well-being. Given the lack of research in this area it seems that further research into the role of Resident Assistants influence on student well-being is warranted.

Finally, one of the key findings of this current study was the positive impact that the physical surroundings, and engagement with the physical space, had on the promotion of student well-being. Almost half of the students in the study discussed, in different ways, how the

physical beauty of campus positively influenced their mental well-being. Students also talked about using the outdoor space to engage in physical activities by themselves, with peers, or with campus organizations. The combination of the beauty of the surroundings, the environmental design of space, in conjunction with engaging experiences, had great impact on how students perceived and used the physical spaces of campus, especially the outdoor spaces. Interestingly, in the review of literature on college student well-being there was no single study that considered how campus environment, use of space, and aesthetic appeal can positively promote well-being. This is clearly an area for both research and practical implications for campus administrators.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Findings from this study suggest implications for future research as well as practice on college campuses. Several recommendations can be made: 1.) Given that first year students respond positively to diverse others with diverse religious backgrounds, worldviews, and ideologies, it seems like a prime opportunity to extend research into understanding what classroom curriculum most positively impacts well-being from a diversity perspective. This also has practical implications because more diversity experiences in the classroom would seem to foster greater well-being; 2.) Because students respond positively to how faculty build community within their own classrooms, and also respond positively to the care that faculty show about their lives within and beyond the classroom, it is also evident that this understanding needs to be promoted among faculty ranks, especially those who teach courses with majority first-year students; 3.) Prior studies also indicate that students respond positively to engaging academic experiences within the classroom, however it is not understood from a well-being perspective, how engaging experiences may differ or how some academic experiences may be more impactful than others. As stated earlier, further research is warranted which considers the nature of classroom experiences from a student- focused, phenomenological lens; 4.) Findings also suggest that the role of the resident assistant, in the lives of first-year students, has important, positive impact on student well-being, especially as their efforts relate to how they help build community for their first-year residents. Given this, it seems that practical efforts should be made for resident assistant training in this area; 5.) Finally, study findings point to the obvious and beneficial impact that campus aesthetics have on student well-being. Not only does physical beauty count on a campus, it is also important to understand how space is used. This area is ripe for practical consideration and future research since no prior research was found that examines campus environment, use of space, and positive impact on student well-being. This study evidences that resources allocated to enhance campus environments do matter, and students pay attention to both the use of space, and aesthetics.

Overall findings are key indicators of how resources could be allocated for first year initiatives as well as possible directions for future research on student well-being.

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