



Well-Being and Higher Education: A Strategy for Change and the Realization of Education's Greater Purposes

Harward, Donald W., ed.

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Book Review

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“Well-being” is a complicated construct with at least two referents: the hedonic tradition considering well-being as feelings, and the eudaimonic tradition which sees well-being as a relational activity, the practice of being well, or living life well. This volume explores the various implications and connections existing between well-being (by either definition) and higher education (5). In so doing, the contributions in this volume argue that higher education must change its focus to give “priority to and support for those experiences that make learning and well-being connected objectives” (11). In other words, the authors of this volume suggest that well-being is at the core of higher education, and therefore, institutions of higher learning ought to prioritize experiences that contribute to a student’s well-being.

For those involved in higher education, the context for this volume is readily apparent. The landscape of education, as Laurie Schreiner describes it, is a perfect storm wherein,

The most diverse group of students enters higher education from schools that have ill-prepared them for college at the same time that postsecondary institutions have shifted their focus to credentialism and financial sustainability. The promise of higher education, to empower students and broaden their capacity to engage the world as global citizens and whole persons, has narrowed to the point that is now perceived as simply a steppingstone to a better job. (136)

It is within this context, and against this background that the present volume should be read. Well-being is not a silver bullet, and a focus on well-being in education will not solve all of these problems. But, as the diverse contributions in this volume illustrate, a focus on well-being either at the level of the individual instructor, in programmatic directions, or as an

essential direction of whole institutions, goes a long way towards revitalizing the significance of higher education and towards ensuring that students benefit from the time they spend in college.

The book is made up of thirty-four essays, which are organized into four parts. The first section is entitled “Analysis and Meaning” and deals with the task of defining well-being and describing it fully, with particular attention to the way in which the concept relates to higher education. The essays in this section are highly critical of the job skills or certification centered model of education and often shift into a defense of the liberal arts. By and large, their point is clear – college education has larger impacts on a student’s life than appear in the classroom, or on assessments of various types. These impacts include the practical factors of a student’s physical and psychological well-being both while they are in school and after graduation. There are also more abstract implications including the development of virtue, community, and citizenship. At the heart of all of these essays are the larger questions about the essential mission of higher education, and the equally difficult question of identifying the defining characteristics of educated students.

The second section, “Manifestations and Implementation,” treats various issues brought about by re-focusing higher education onto the development of well-being. Key concepts articulated in this section are those of flourishing, self-authorship, and identity development, and there is also a sustained argument across several essays for the institutional re-definition of student success along with the concomitant implications for assessing success in a well-being paradigm.

The third section, “Facilitation: Curricular, Pedagogic and Across Boundaries,” takes on some programmatic consequences of the preceding discussions of well-being. These essays take pre-existing institutional initiatives as something of a case study exploring larger questions of what shape institutions or initiatives focused on well-being would take. Well-being initiatives at Georgetown, George Mason, and Morehouse are analyzed, as are implications of campus carry legislation, and the impact of national goals related to degree completion on community college students and their well-being.

The final section, “The Logic of Change: Why, What, and How?” postulates several different theoretical treatments of why institutions of higher education should take on the hard work of change and should reorganize their efforts and re-center their initiatives around well-being. Comparisons are drawn between institutional change in health care and that in higher education. Authors articulate the social/historical context that makes the time ripe for the reinvention of higher education. Also, the benefit of problem-based capstone courses, and

particularly the reorganization of curriculum around such courses, are identified.

Well-being is a tremendously important concept for the future of higher education, and this volume presents a variety of approaches to the application of well-being onto various aspects of the higher educational institution. Instructors can use this volume to consider ways of adapting their teaching towards the beneficial education of the whole student. Administrators would benefit from thinking through the implications that curriculum and institutional structures and approaches have on student well-being (and that of university staff and faculty). The individual essays are organized well and present cogent arguments. This volume is a great resource for anyone interested in the development of well-being in higher education.

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