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Students' wellbeing in positive higher education: conceptual frameworks and influencing factors

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Students' wellbeing in higher education is increasingly recognized as a crucial factor for academic success and personal development. This narrative review examines how positive psychology frameworks contribute to college student wellbeing. Key findings indicate that student wellbeing is a multidimensional construct shaped by personal attributes, academic factors, and institutional context. Positive psychology provides a conceptual lens, including theories such as PERMA and self-determination, to understand and enhance wellbeing in university settings. The review highlights the need for holistic, proactive approaches that integrate wellbeing into the fabric of higher education. Implications include incorporating wellbeing skills into curricula, fostering supportive learning environments, and campus-wide policies that prioritize students' mental health. By aligning educational practices with positive psychology, institutions can cultivate flourishing students poised to thrive academically and personally.

KEYWORDS

students' wellbeing, positive psychology, higher education, conceptual frameworks, influencing factors

1 Introduction

Student wellbeing has emerged as a paramount concern in higher education, with mounting evidence that mental health and happiness are closely tied to learning and academic success. University life is a pivotal transitional period marked by new academic challenges, social environments, and personal growth opportunities. Yet, many college students experience significant stress and psychological distress during this time. Surveys indicate that roughly half of university students report elevated levels of stress or emotional distress, and a substantial proportion meet criteria for mental health problems (Chaudhry et al., 2024). Such mental health struggles can impair students' concentration, academic performance, and likelihood of persisting in their studies. Conversely, when students feel supported and have positive psychosocial resources, they tend to show better academic adjustment, higher engagement, and improved retention (Furlong et al., 2014). These patterns underscore the importance of prioritizing student wellbeing as an educational outcome in its own right and as a means to foster academic achievement.

Positive psychology provides a useful framework for understanding and promoting student wellbeing in higher education. Traditionally, campus mental health efforts focused on reacting to problems and reducing pathology (e.g., treating depression or anxiety). In contrast, positive psychology advocates a proactive approach that emphasizes building students' strengths, resilience, and happiness as a complement to alleviating illness (Seligman et al., 2009). It shifts the focus from "What's wrong with students?" to "What makes students thrive?" This perspective aligns with the concept of positive education, which is defined as education

for both traditional academic skills and for wellbeing or happiness. Seligman et al. (2009) argue that the high prevalence of youth depression and only modest gains in life satisfaction call for teaching the “skills for happiness” in school and university. In higher education, a positive psychology approach means creating learning environments and experiences that cultivate positive emotions, engagement, meaningful relationships, and a sense of purpose alongside intellectual development. This review situates itself at the intersection of educational psychology and positive psychology, aiming to synthesize current knowledge on college student wellbeing and how it can be enhanced.

2 Methodology

This narrative review intends to identify, select, and synthesize relevant literature on students’ wellbeing in positive higher education. The aim was to capture a broad range of studies including theoretical frameworks, empirical research on influencing factors. Two research questions were articulated:

- 1) What are the key theoretical frameworks regarding to student wellbeing?
- 2) What are the key factors influencing on student wellbeing in higher education?

The comprehensive searches were conducted in multiple academic databases and search engines, focusing on psychology and education disciplines. The databases included ERIC, Web of Science, Scopus, and Google Scholar. The search strategy combined keywords related to wellbeing, positive psychology, and higher education. Search strings included: “student wellbeing” OR “student wellness” OR “mental health” AND “higher education” OR “college” OR “university” AND “positive psychology” OR “positive education” OR “resilience” OR “mindfulness” OR “support.” This approach ensures that the review is grounded in the existing literature while allowing for an integrative narrative that addresses the multifaceted nature of the topic.

3 Findings

3.1 Theoretical frameworks

3.1.1 Wellbeing in students

Wellbeing is a broad construct that encompasses optimal psychological functioning and experience. In the context of higher education, student wellbeing typically includes emotional wellbeing (positive feelings, life satisfaction), psychological wellbeing (sense of meaning, personal growth, self-realization), and social wellbeing (quality of relationships and sense of belonging). Positive psychology scholars emphasize that wellbeing is not merely the absence of mental illness, but the presence of positive states and functioning, a perspective captured by Keyes’ dual-continua model of mental health. Keyes (2007) argues that individuals can be free of diagnosed mental disorders yet still “languish” (low wellbeing), or conversely can have a mental illness but still “flourish” with high wellbeing. Flourishing represents the optimal end of the wellbeing spectrum, a state of thriving marked by happiness, fulfillment, and positive functioning in

life. Applying this concept to students, flourishing students are those who feel good about their lives at university and are functioning well academically, socially, and personally. The goal of positive education in universities is to increase the proportion of students who are flourishing, not just to decrease those who are failing or unwell.

3.1.2 Positive psychology theories

Several key theories from positive psychology offer a framework for understanding student wellbeing. PERMA model of wellbeing, developed by Seligman (2011), identifies five core elements of a flourishing life: Positive emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. In the PERMA framework, a student high in wellbeing would frequently experience positive emotions (such as enjoyment or gratitude) in their day-to-day campus life, be deeply engaged with their studies or extracurricular activities, have supportive relationships and a sense of belonging, find meaning or purpose in their education, and experience a sense of achievement and growth. The PERMA model has been applied to educational settings as a way to design activities and measure outcomes that go beyond GPA to include these dimensions of flourishing.

Another influential theory is Self-Determination Theory (SDT), proposed by Deci and Ryan (2000), which posits that wellbeing is supported when three basic psychological needs are met: autonomy (feeling in control and self-directed), competence (feeling effective and capable), and relatedness (feeling connected to others). In a university context, SDT suggests that students thrive when they have some choice in their learning, receive feedback that builds their mastery, and feel a sense of community with peers and faculty. Research guided by SDT shows that satisfaction of these needs is associated with greater intrinsic motivation and wellbeing among students, whereas thwarting these needs can lead to disengagement and distress. For example, a supportive professor who encourages student autonomy, builds their confidence, and fosters an inclusive class climate can enhance students’ motivation and mental health.

Other relevant concepts include Psychological Wellbeing (PWB) theory by Ryff (1989), which outlines dimensions like self-acceptance, environmental mastery, positive relationships, personal growth, purpose in life, and autonomy as components of wellbeing. These dimensions closely overlap with positive traits and skills educators may seek to cultivate in students. Broaden-and-Build Theory (Fredrickson, 2001) further explains how experiences of positive emotion can broaden students’ thought-action repertoires (e.g., encouraging creativity, openness to new people and ideas) and build enduring personal resources such as resilience or social networks, which in turn support wellbeing and academic development.

3.1.3 Positive education in higher education

Grounded in these theories, the positive education movement provides a conceptual framework for integrating wellbeing into educational practice. Positive education advocates that universities should teach “the skills of happiness” and resilience alongside academic knowledge (Seligman et al., 2009). This approach is motivated by evidence that wellbeing and learning are synergistic: students who feel positive and engaged tend to learn more effectively, and educational success can fuel wellbeing. For instance, happiness and a sense of meaning can improve cognitive functioning (attention, memory) and academic persistence, just as supportive relationships on campus can buffer stress and prevent burnout. In higher education,

positive education frameworks often draw on the PERMA model to create “wellbeing curricula” or co-curricular programs.

These might involve training in mindfulness meditation, exercises in identifying and using character strengths, building growth mindsets, or practicing gratitude—all grounded in positive psychology interventions found effective in other contexts. The conceptual premise is that by equipping students with resilience skills, emotional intelligence, and strategies for self-care and positive thinking, so that students can improve their overall wellbeing and their capacity to cope with the challenges of university life. Such an approach does not ignore mental illness; rather, it complements traditional mental health services with a broader wellness promotion strategy (Keyes, 2007). Therefore, the conceptual foundation for this review combines the dual focus of reducing distress and cultivating positive wellbeing. It views student wellbeing as a holistic construct influenced by individual strengths and needs fulfillment, and it embraces positive psychology models (such as PERMA and SDT) as guiding frameworks to create educational environments where students can flourish.

3.2 Factors influencing student wellbeing

Students’ wellbeing in higher education is shaped by a dynamic interplay of personal, academic, and institutional factors. Understanding these factors is crucial for identifying leverage points to improve student wellness. Three key influences on student wellbeing are examined: (1) personal characteristics and behaviors of the student, (2) academic experiences and demands, and (3) the broader social and institutional environment of the university.

3.2.1 Personal factors

Each student enters college with a unique set of personal attributes—personality traits, habits, coping skills, and life circumstances—that can affect how they handle stress and thrive (or struggle) in the university setting. One well-established influence is self-efficacy, or the belief in one’s ability to handle challenges and succeed in specific tasks. High self-efficacy has been linked to numerous positive outcomes for students, including greater happiness, adaptive coping, and lower stress. Students with strong academic self-efficacy tend to view difficult coursework as a challenge to be mastered rather than an insurmountable threat, which in turn is associated with better wellbeing and achievement. Other personal resources, such as optimism, hope, and emotional stability, likewise serve as buffers against stress. It is important to note that students are not merely passive recipients of these factors; they can actively influence their own wellbeing through their behaviors and choices. Proactive coping strategies (time management, seeking help, engaging in self-care) can mitigate stress, while maladaptive behaviors (procrastination, social isolation, self-criticism) can undermine wellbeing (Bakker and Mostert, 2024). Therefore, individual differences in mindset, skills, and behavior significantly shape students’ wellbeing trajectory in the university.

3.2.2 Academic factors

The nature of students’ academic experience is a major determinant of their psychological wellbeing. Universities are inherently achievement-focused environments, and academic pressures can be both a source of growth and of stress. Key academic

factors include workload and demands, evaluation stress, level of engagement, and academic support. According to the Study Demands-Resources model (an adaptation of the Job Demands-Resources model to student life), high study demands, such as excessive workload, very difficult material, time pressure, and academic competition, can lead to burnout and diminished wellbeing if not balanced by adequate resources (Bakker and Mostert, 2024). Research has documented that a significant subset of college students experience burnout symptoms due to chronic academic stress, which in turn correlate with depression and dropout intentions (Bresó et al., 2007). Team-based learning environments can also impact wellbeing: a study in a business school context found that a positive internal team environment was associated with higher psychological wellbeing in students (Chaudhry et al., 2024). This effect occurred partly because a healthy team climate fostered greater academic engagement, which then boosted wellbeing. Therefore, when students perceive their academic demands to outweigh their resources, their wellbeing may suffer; conversely, a balanced academic environment that challenges students while supporting them can enhance their growth and wellbeing.

3.2.3 Social factors

Beyond individual and course-level factors, the broader institutional environment and support systems significantly affect student wellbeing, among which is the presence of social support, from friends, family, peers, mentors, and the institution itself. Social support provides students with emotional encouragement, practical help, and a sense of belonging, all of which are vital for navigating the ups and downs of college life. Research confirms a strong positive association between perceived social support and student wellbeing (Baumeister and Leary, 1995; Furlong et al., 2014). Students who feel they have people to turn to experience lower stress and greater life satisfaction. In the transition to university, the quality of relationships plays a key role in adjustment: forming supportive friendships on campus is linked to better emotional adjustment in the first year. The institutional context can either buffer students from stress or amplify it. Universities that provide strong support networks and cultivate a caring community help students thrive, whereas those that lack support or have a toxic climate put students’ wellbeing at risk. Importantly, personal, academic, and institutional factors do not operate in isolation—they often interact. Optimal student wellbeing arises when personal strengths are nurtured by positive academic experiences and reinforced by a healthy, supportive institutional culture.

4 Discussion

This review paints an encouraging yet complex picture of student wellbeing in higher education and how it can be supported through positive psychology principles. It is clear that student wellbeing is a multifaceted construct influenced by a web of personal, academic, and environmental factors. No single factor alone determines a student’s wellbeing; rather, it is the cumulative effect of individual dispositions (such as optimism or self-efficacy), academic experiences (such as manageable workload and engaging pedagogy), and social/institutional context (such as support networks and campus culture) that produces either a flourishing or floundering student. This aligns with theoretical models like the Study Demands-Resources

framework, which highlight that wellbeing results from the balance between challenges and supports (Bakker and Mostert, 2024). Students who enjoy strong resources—be it internal strengths or external supports—are more likely to thrive even when facing typical college stressors. For example, a student high in resilience and surrounded by encouraging peers and mentors may interpret a poor exam grade as a solvable setback, whereas a less supported student might experience the same setback as catastrophic, with ensuing declines in wellbeing.

One consistent theme is the protective power of social support. Across studies, social connectedness emerges as one of the most robust predictors of better wellbeing and lower distress among college students. This underscores that universities should treat social integration and community-building not as ancillary, feel-good endeavors, but as central to student health and success. Another important pattern is the dual nature of academic engagement: when students are intellectually engaged and find meaning in their studies, academic work becomes a source of fulfillment contributing positively to wellbeing (e.g., through feelings of accomplishment and purpose). However, when academic demands become excessive or students feel a lack of control, academic life becomes a significant stressor. The fact that academic burnout is prevalent in a portion of students suggests that more needs to be done to achieve that balance (Salmela-Aro and Read, 2017).

Future work could focus on the students' long-term well-being, such as Gallup Alumni Survey, which has demonstrated the enduring influence of undergraduate experiences across the social, community, financial, physical, and career wellbeing domains. The Gallup approach offers actionable life domains that align with institutional outcomes (e.g., career readiness, campus community engagement). Recent perspectives advocate for long-term student well-being, which pedagogical practices such as service learning, authentic research, and mentoring can support to foster lifelong well-being trajectories (White et al., 2024). This complements positive-psychology frameworks by situating theoretical constructs within transformative undergraduate experiences.

The reviewed evidence carries several practical implications. Firstly, higher education institutions should treat student wellbeing as a strategic priority linked to their educational mission. Just as universities invest in academic skills centers, they might consider investing in wellbeing centers or initiatives that coordinate efforts across campus (counseling, health promotion, student affairs, and academic affairs). It is clear that wellbeing and academic performance are intertwined; therefore, supporting mental health is supporting learning. For educators, integrating wellbeing principles into teaching can be as simple as incorporating brief mindfulness exercises at the start of class, providing flexibility and autonomy in assignments, or facilitating positive peer interactions through group work.

Training faculty and staff to be sensitive to student wellbeing ("gatekeeper training" or mental health literacy training) can create a more compassionate campus where students struggling are noticed and guided to help sooner. As positive psychology in education matures, researchers should continue to refine theoretical frameworks specific to higher education. For instance, is PERMA fully adequate to capture student wellbeing, or should it add an extra dimension? Some have argued that physical health behaviors be explicitly added when assessing student wellbeing. Also, the transition to adulthood that college represents means identity development is a big part of wellbeing—theories bridging positive psychology and developmental psychology could be fruitful.

5 Conclusion

In an era when colleges and universities are increasingly called upon to develop not just learned graduates, but healthy and adaptable individuals, the importance of fostering students' wellbeing in higher education cannot be overstated. This review has highlighted that students' wellbeing is a complex, multidimensional construct that underpins and interacts with their academic life. It is seen that a positive higher education experience—one in which students flourish—is characterized by supportive relationships, meaningful engagement, manageable challenges, and opportunities for personal growth. Nurturing wellbeing is thus both an end in itself and a means to achieve traditional academic goals.

Implementing a positive approach to higher education will require effort and collaboration. Faculty, administrators, counseling professionals, and students themselves all have roles to play in this cultural shift. Faculty can integrate wellbeing topics or pedagogies that humanize the learning process; student affairs staff can deliver programs and create spaces that encourage connection and personal development; and students can engage in practices and communities that support their own and their peers' wellness. Importantly, leadership support is crucial—when university leaders prioritize wellbeing in strategic plans and allocate resources to it, it legitimizes these efforts across campus. Ultimately, fostering wellbeing in higher education is an investment in students' holistic success—academically, personally, and as future professionals and citizens.

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