

# Come into Bloom: A Grounded Theory of Well-being among Filipino University Students



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**ABSTRACT.** Most studies in positive psychology focused on psychological factors and their impact on mental health based on Western models and quantitative approaches (Datu et al., 2018). Thus, there is a need to develop further the knowledge and application of concepts and theoretical models grounded in the lived experiences of the Filipino population. The present study utilized a grounded theory method to build a Filipino-based well-being model among university students. The BLOOMS Model of Well-being proposed that holistic well-being comprises five interconnected dimensions (Academic, Psycho-emotional, Physical, Social, and Spiritual). The study found that personal factors, social influences, and unexpected life events influenced well-being. Also, the study suggested that the following strategies enhanced well-being: building, leveraging, owning, opening, molding, and self-enhancing practices, leading to holistic growth. Data from this study can serve as a resource for further

exploration of positive psychology and developing mental health policies and programs for university students.

## 1.0. Introduction

Well-being is an important area of research for psychology and other allied disciplines, both locally and internationally. Cross-cultural investigations investigated differences between Western and Eastern approaches to well-being. In Joshanloo's (2014) conceptual analyses, essential differences were noted and indicated an investigation of indigenous cultures is necessary before applying western models and measures of mental well-being. The need to develop culturally-based positive psychology knowledge was anchored on the belief that culture and background influence well-being. Cross-cultural studies found significant differences among nations in terms of well-being, such as differences in how positive self-evaluations affect well-being outcomes (Rosopa et al., 2016) and the pattern of mental health across the lifespan (Schonfeld et al., 2017).

In contrast, some local researchers reported similar trends suggesting the universality of well-being constructs. To cite an example, Datu and Mateo (2015) found out that meaning in life partially mediated the connection between gratitude and subjective well-being among Filipino adolescents, consistent with findings from Western research. These divergent results pointed to the need for more context-sensitive frameworks in understanding positive psychology constructs (Datu & Lizada, 2018), such as well-being.

In the Philippine context, researchers exploring well-being focused on positive traits and states and their relationships with well-being outcomes in educational settings (Datu et al., 2018). Some local studies involved validating foreign psychological scales in Filipino samples (e.g., Resurreccion, 2017). Despite the number of positive psychological researches conducted, the majority of these studies utilized quantitative approaches. Also, very few qualitative explorations in positive psychology in the Philippine context directly investigated well-being. Sycip et al. (1993), as cited in Samaco-Zamora and Fernandez (2016), inquired into meanings and measurement of well-being, while Paz (2008), as cited in Samaco-Zamora and Fernandez (2016), focused on expressions of wellness through studying semantic networks. Samaco-Zamora and Fernandez (2016) discovered a model on Filipino Wellness using a grounded theory method. However, these local studies did not delve into the experiences of university students that the present study aimed to investigate.

## 2.0. Framework of the Study

Well-being has been defined and explored by various researchers in positive psychology and resluted in different proposed models. Two opposite approaches dominated well-being research, the



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subjective and psychological perspectives (Ruini, 2017). Subjective well-being is concerned about pleasure in life, possessing positive emotions, and avoiding negative affect while, psychological well-being involves attaining fulfillment and meaning in life (Joseph, 2015). Researchers explored perspectives to integrate these two well-being approaches and hypothesized that these could complement one another towards developing optimal well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2001) termed as "positive mental health" (Jahoda, 1958, as cited in Ruini, 2017) and "flourishing or complete mental health" (Keyes, 2002). Thus, this research study explored both perspectives and was not limited to a single lens to provide a comprehensive view of well-being.

Several researchers tried exploring the conceptions of well-being among Filipinos. More recently, Samaco-Zamora and Fernandez (2016) uncovered that a family's good relationship and togetherness and meeting adequate physical and economic needs were essential to the wellness of participants who were 30-40 years of age. Other categories emerged, such as having an occupation to help family, psycho-emotional well-being, and spirituality as a stable help resource during life's difficulties. Local models of wellness were good starting points for well-being research; however, they were general in scope and did not delve into the experiences of university students connected to the objectives of this investigation.

Since this research study aimed to develop a framework from the participants' lived experiences, existing well-being models in the field were utilized in the analysis to draw significant insights from the gathered data and situate the model in the existing literature. The study aimed to investigate both complementary dimensions of subjective and psychological well-being. Thus, an essential framework considered in the analysis is Westerhof and Keyes's (2010) Components of Mental Health Model, which was developed based on the World Health Organization's definition of mental health. They proposed three components of positive mental health; emotional well-being or the feelings of happiness and satisfaction in life; social wellness or positive social functioning in terms of social value and psychological wellness or positive functioning in terms of self-realization. Also, this study valued holism and culture in understanding human behavior, similar to Myers and Sweeney's Indivisible Self-Model of Wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2004).

### **3.0. Methods**

This research study employed a qualitative research design, particularly a grounded theory methodology (GTM), to construct a substantive model focused on "a delimited problem in a particular area" (Charmaz, 2014). This study centered on the situated process of well-being among students in the university setting. Charmaz's constructivist approach to GTM guided this research to harmonize methods from founders Glaser and Strauss (Flick, 2018).

In recognition of the increasing depression prevalence observed in this particular student population (Alayon, 2021), twenty (20) Filipino university students (ages 18-25) presently studying in five different universities in Metro Manila participated in this research. In coordination with various gatekeepers and through purposive sampling, this study involved participants identified as flourishing or moderately mentally healthy as measured by the Mental Health Continuum-Short Form (MHC-SF) and scored low in Patient Health Questionnaire-9 (PHQ-9) as the initial sample to provide substantial data on well-being. Additionally, five (5) university students who attained flourishing or moderately mentally healthy type in the MHC-SF and high scores on PHQ-9 were also interviewed for theoretical sampling. Finally, five (5) mental health professionals were interviewed to explore additional data triangulation perspectives.

This study employed the Personal Information Sheet (PIS) to obtain socio-demographic data from the interview participants. MHC-SF (14-item) evaluated individuals' emotional, psychological and social well-being (Keyes et al., 2008). Also, this study utilized the PHQ-9, a brief self-report instrument used in the diagnostic screening of depression for adults (Thibodeau & Asmundson, 2014). Lastly, this research utilized semi-structured interview guides for student respondents and mental health professionals constructed by the researcher, which underwent content validation by experts.

Online data collection through intensive video call interviews was conducted in adherence to quarantine protocols and to protect the participants and researcher of possible health risks during the COVID-19 pandemic, upholding the principle of non-maleficence in research ethics. In recent years, the utilization of video call interviews has paved the way for researchers to observe participants' verbal and non-verbal cues (Salmons, 2012), as they shared similar dynamics, the same level of self-

disclosure, and comparable quantity and quality of themes with in-person interviews (Shapka et al., 2016). The present study sought approval from the institutional Ethics Review Committee. The participants signed the informed consent form and were reminded of their right to stop the interview at any time they desired. Interview protocol utilized open-ended questions about their well-being experiences before and during the pandemic, such as "What personal actions have you taken to achieve well-being?" followed by subsequent probing questions. All interviews were recorded and properly documented, observing strict confidentiality and data protection.

In the analysis, initial coding identified categories and properties of well-being through constant comparison of data from field texts and categories with other data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Identified categories were studied further using focused coding and guided by a consequential matrix. Data triangulation through gathering perspectives from service providers ensured data's trustworthiness and truthfulness. Finally, theoretical coding focused on exploring connections between categories, leading to theory-building. This research achieved theoretical saturation after 25 interviews. Member checking procedures validated findings by conducting follow-up interviews with selected participants to review and clarify resulting codes as well as utilizing peer debriefing (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

#### **4.0. Results and Discussion**

##### **Spiral Dimensions of Well-being**

This research led to the formation of the BLOOMS Model of Well-being, represented by a flowering plant growing in rich soil. The participants described well-being as holistic, as verbalized by one, "well-being is kind of synonymous to being well-rounded in different aspects of your life" (R19), highlighting the value of the different components of well-being, similar to the Westerhof and Keyes's (2010) Model of Mental Health.

Despite similarities to existing frameworks primarily based on quantitative approaches, this model grounded from qualitative data provided depth about the well-being experiences of Filipino university students. In the participants' conceptualizations, well-being emerged as a construct not confined in one aspect alone, as one participant claimed, "well-being is not just the absence of sickness" (R13), which could be connected to the Indivisible Self-model of Wellness, highlighting holism in well-being (Myers & Sweeney, 2004). Well-being went beyond experiencing positive emotions; as one participant shared, "It doesn't mean that when you are happy, your mental and emotional health is ok" (R9). This finding was consistent with Kuppens et al.'s (2008) study as they found cultural differences in how positive and negative emotions related to the quality of life. In addition, this model proposed that the well-being of Filipino university students is composed of five (5) dimensions spirally connected as petals of the growing flower. A participant supported this by saying, "they are all connected in a system within. And since it is a system, one thing affects the other." (R11).

In terms of the physical dimension, participants experienced well-being if they could get adequate sleep and rest and possessed good nutrition and energy level. They did not have any physical health problems, could exercise regularly, maintained physical fitness, and had good grooming. Essential to the social dimension of the well-being of participants were experiences of social connection and environment support, connected to the fulfillment of one's relational needs. The participants experienced empathy towards others and exhibited social awareness. They were into helping, social involvement as well as leadership, and service. The participants highlighted that positive and negative emotions were equally crucial in the psycho-emotional dimension, leading to better regulation of emotion and stability.

Also, participants possessed a positive state of mind, such as being optimistic (Kirby et al., 2021) and finding meaning in life during the COVID 19 pandemic (Arslan et al., 2020). They were resilient, coping reasonably well, and engaged in effective stress management and career planning. Moreover, they were self-aware, valued their strengths, accepted their weaknesses, and committed to improving themselves. Lastly, they possessed character strengths essential to well-being: perseverance, curiosity, love of learning, and honesty. The resulting dimensions shared several similarities with other well-being models, illustrating the connection of the current findings to the existing literature, such as the psycho-emotional aspect (Samaco-Zamora & Fernandez, 2016), social wellness (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010), physical and social self (Myers & Sweeney, 2004), and positive relations dimension (Ryff & Keyes, 1995).

Compared to other models, most researchers did not typically identify academic and spiritual dimensions of well-being. As this study highlighted, the participants valued their faith, relationship with God, and commitment to moral values. University students experienced well-being when they engaged in religious practices and their personal experience of spirituality (Waggoner, 2016), even during the COVID 19 pandemic (Eloff, 2021). Lastly, the academic aspect of well-being was highly influential, affecting other facets of the participants' lives, as one supported this by saying, "the school has really made me who I am" (R24). Participants experienced well-being when they were productive, possessed academic resilience, and effective task management in their academic life.

### **Factors affecting Well-being**

Another novel finding incorporated in this model was the identification of the factors affecting well-being: personal and external influences. Personal factors involved having good physical and psycho-emotional functioning, healthy self-esteem, and strong spiritual life. In addition, students' personality traits, their family's socio-economic status, and personal decision to engage in intended activities contributed to their well-being. Like the plant rooted in rich soil, external factors revolved around various social contexts. Supportive and validating family environment and other social relationships (e.g., friends, peers, significant others) influenced participants' well-being. In particular, strong family bonding positively influenced well-being during the pandemic (Alfawaz et al., 2021). They also acknowledged how they value the advice and constructive criticisms from their immediate support groups. Additionally, responses from the participants highlighted the value of having relatable experiences and common interests with peers. In addition to close social networks, interactions with classmates and acquaintances contributed to student well-being (Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014). However, pressure, comparisons, and the lack of quality time in these social relationships negatively affected the well-being of participants.

The university environment emerged as an equally important factor influencing well-being, consistent with the amount of time and focus directed to academic life. University professors who were accommodating, understanding and encouraging, and other behaviors promoting quality interactions contributed to the well-being of students (Trolian et al., 2020). However, debilitating academic pressure and having inconsiderate and criticizing teachers negatively affected the participants. The current difficulties of the virtual learning setting were also challenging for them during the pandemic (Clabaugh et al., 2021), supporting how the academic climate could influence the well-being of university students (Rania et al., 2014).

The digital environment has also been increasingly influential to participants' well-being, such as their perspectives and emotions had been affected by influencers, online resources, gaming, and social media. Participants recognized the insights and values they gained from watching internet shows and listening to music, as one participant mentioned how songs from a particular group influenced her well-being, "I think, music, particularly BTS" (R20). Also, the use of social networking sites in connecting and building relationships is associated with greater well-being (Nabi et al., 2013).

Finally, the participants mentioned how important the economic and political state of the community and society is to their well-being, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic situation and uncertainties on government crisis response brought frustrations and worries. One of the participants emotionally shared, "I don't know what will happen, what will happen in the future if this is what is happening now?" (R3), supported by a study on the impact of future anxiety due to the pandemic (Paredes et al., 2021). However, community identification and positive relationships in more extensive social networks were vital (Greenaway et al., 2015), as one expressed the value of "having a community with the same belief that you are holding to, the group of people that you know will understand one another" (R20).

Like rain, unexpected events could either nurture an individual's growth or hamper personal development. Leadership and organizational involvements and going beyond one's comfort zone served as empowering opportunities for these participants. As one of them stated how leadership opportunities helped him, "it really opened opportunities for me to grow, to learn more, to be more socially aware, to be more compassionate, to be more responsive, pro-active, critical" (R6). Difficult life events such as significant death, financial crisis, failures, and romantic break-ups enabled participants toward well-being. As one participant shared the impact of a significant death on her life, "I realized that I need to improve myself because I always think that tomorrow is never guaranteed" (R4). These challenging life events had varying impacts on different individuals; however, the participants found

meaning in these situations by making sense of the difficulties and understanding how these fit in their lives (Park, 2010).

### **Well-being Strategies**

In comparison to previous models, this study primarily focused on the actions taken by the participants to enhance well-being, represented as leaves that drive the growth of the whole plant.

*Building Strategies.* Building strategies composed of habits were essential to healthy functioning, as the participants reported that they engaged in healthy eating and hydration, regular exercise, adequate sleep and rest, and personal hygiene. Validating the importance of healthy eating practices in well-being (Schnettler et al., 2015), a participant shared, "I noticed that I feel a lot better about myself" (R19). The verbalization of a participant supported the value of physical activity during the pandemic (Lukacs, 2021) by saying, "I've been trying to exercise as often as I can every morning" (R1). Vital to one's well-being is rest and sleep (Ridner et al., 2016); as one participant stated, "I also have to rest, to charge my well-being" (R5).

*Leveraging Strategies.* Leveraging strategies aimed towards optimizing resources available in the environment that lead to student well-being. The seeking type of leveraging referred to actions directed to receive support and help from others, supported by recent research on how perceived support showed a positive relationship with well-being during the COVID 19 pandemic (Huang & Zhang, 2021). A participant shared how she connects to others, "simple catch-up with friends and gaming, and at times, we have watch parties" (R7). Participants reached out to significant others for support in difficult times, as one expressed, "I approach my significant other first because he's always there to listen to me" (R25). These strategies brought positive feelings to the participants, and at the same time, they were able to increase their confidence and feel in control of their lives (Greenaway et al., 2015). Interestingly, connecting to their pets boosted their well-being (Luhmann & Kalitzki, 2018); as one participant expressed, "I find comfort with my pet, as we sleep and hug each other as we sleep" (R20). In addition, participants reported how their involvement in organizations influenced their well-being, as one supported this by saying, "it's really a way for us to distress after a long day of academics" (R19). Participants also reported that help-seeking behaviors were essential to well-being, as supported by this verbalization, "I ask for the opinion of others because I may miss out on something that they might be of help" (R11).

Contributing style of leveraging included daily experiences of empathy (Depow et al., 2021), as one participant stated that during this pandemic, he copes by "thinking about other people and how they fare" (R1). Helping and volunteering enhanced participants' well-being (Oarga et al., 2015), as shared by one of them, "I volunteer to cook (for the family) as much I can. There is self-fulfillment as well (in what I do)" (R23). These pro-social behaviors stemmed from personal decisions and emotional engagement to support others, enhancing providers' well-being (Morelli et al., 2015).

*Opening Strategies.* Opening strategies allowed participants the release of their thoughts and feelings and encouraged them to understand their current situation. Expressive tools facilitated participants' release of their innermost cognitions and emotions, thus, enhancing the quality of life during the pandemic (Panayiotou et al., 2021). As one participant mentioned how honestly he communicates to God daily, "I first tell God that I am thankful for this and that, but at times, I also ask Him why is this happening" (R5). A study on how students utilized spiritual coping strategies to deal with negative emotions during the pandemic supported this finding (Eloff, 2021). Another participant articulated how expressive writing helps her (Cheung et al., 2019), "writing is like a stress reliever because I can say, I can write what is on my mind" (R4).

Reflective tools helped participants enhance their well-being, such as religious activities, meditation, and personal reflection. In connection, one participant shared that, "I meditate in the morning, around 5 minutes, sitting in silence in our room" (R1). Another participant verbalized that "before the start of classes, I have time to sit down and then listen to a few podcasts that help me in grounding myself that I don't need to worry. She added that "God is there, He will never leave me, and probably all of these is happening for a reason" (R12). This strategy highlighted how spirituality improved student well-being, mediated by hope and meaning of life (Wnuk & Marcinkowski, 2014).

*Owning Strategies.* The university students subscribed to owning strategies to acknowledge their negative emotions and effectively handle these difficult feelings and life's challenges. This increased focus on negative affect was inconsistent with hedonic orientation. The participants recognized the vital balance between positive and negative affect, supporting significant differences between individualistic and collectivist cultures (Kormi-Nouri et al., 2013).

The affirming style included several strategies to enhance one's well-being. Participants expressed that dealing with their problems on their own and accepting the negative emotions were necessary, supported by a recent study during the pandemic (Panayiotou et al., 2021), as one said, "every time I fail, every time I'm down, my first action is to let myself cave, let myself cry" (R11). Strengthening self-awareness and self-belief were also highlighted as well-being practices, as a participant mentioned, "I will not think about it (the pressure) because I know I can accomplish it" (R15). These strategies shared similarities with the techniques utilized in Seligman's Positive Psychotherapy and Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (Burckhardt et al., 2016), which highlighted the value of acceptance of emotions and exploration of positive perspectives.

The enabling techniques aimed to manage one's emotions and manifest courage in facing complex challenges, instrumental in developing one's emotional competence (Por et al., 2011). To ensure well-being, one participant stated how she effectively managed her emotions during the pandemic (Panayiotou et al., 2021), "It is better to release (one's emotions) every day because once you release those things, it's like a weight lifted off" (R25). Possessing courage could be connected to the construct of autonomy, characterized by self-determination, independence, and the capacity to withstand societal pressure (Ryff & Keyes, 1995), as one participant verbalized, "I really wanted to rely on myself more than relying on others, because they are not always available for me" (R4).

*Molding Strategies.* These strategies aim to create and form lasting and positive changes in one's perspectives and behaviors. Action-oriented techniques focused on engaging in specific steps towards holistic well-being, similar to the findings that approach-oriented coping strategy positively correlated with college students' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic (Valladolid, 2021). A participant verbalized that the first thing she did when managing numerous tasks was to "take a pause to organize first what I need to prioritize, what is the first step" (R3). Another participant mentioned the value of doing things ahead of time, "I always do it ahead of time, so when the schedule is free, I can put other tasks on that" (R9). Also, the participants' time management varied from being flexible to organized, but they set a designated free time for needed rest, relaxation, and recreation (Wang et al., 2011). As one participant articulated, "I want my itinerary planned for the day, but I opened myself for more exploration and spontaneity which added spice and fun to my life" (R19). In addition, digital detox and reduced social media time led to significant improvements in well-being (Hunt et al., 2018); as one shared, "I reduce my time in browsing Facebook and Twitter just to get my mind off" (R14).

Strategies directed towards forming positive and functional ways of thinking leading to well-being gains were cognitive in orientation. Participants shared the importance of gratitude in their daily lives, as one verbalized, "I list down three things that I am grateful for the day, which could be as simple as waking up" (R13). Also, they emphasized the value of being mindful and focusing at present (Klainin-Yobas et al., 2016), as verbalized by one, "I only like to think about what I can do at present" (R1). The significance of optimistic appraisal in well-being during the pandemic (Kirby et al., 2021) also emerged from the responses, as a participant claimed, "there's always something I can look forward to" (R12). Lastly, participants employed effective thought management techniques, as one participant expressed how she dealt with overthinking, "I just don't avoid these thoughts, I face them head-on and fight them off" (R16).

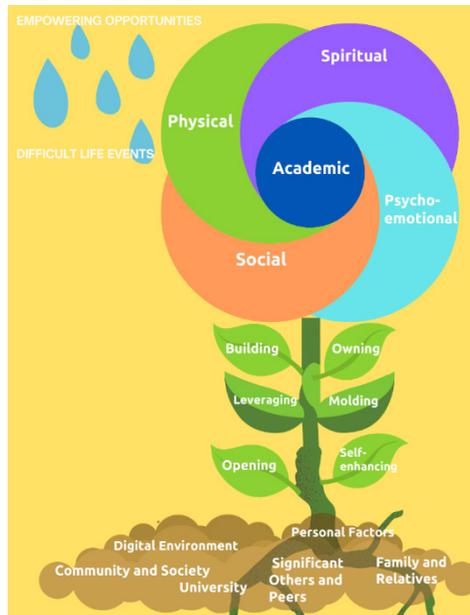
*Self-enhancing Strategies.* Self-enhancing represented techniques intended towards valuing and empowering the individual. Valuing style of strategies composed of essential practices revolving around self-love. The value of self-rewards by scheduling enjoyable activities enhanced well-being (MacLeod & Luzon, 2014), as one participant shared how she rewards herself when she accomplishes something, "sleep, or food, or dancing, or watching movies in Netflix, in YouTube" (R10). Self-compassion was also evident in the verbalizations as one emotionally shared that despite delays in her academic progress, she reminds herself that, "I have my own timeline, I shouldn't be competing with other people because this is my life" (R24). In support of this finding, self-compassion has been

found to enhance well-being components during the pandemic (Li et al., 2021).

The empowering tools focused on techniques that capitalize on the capacity to help and develop oneself (Gagnon et al., 2016). These techniques could be connected to personal growth, highlighting the value of engaging and being open to growth-promoting opportunities (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). As one participant verbalized, "I'm grabbing almost all opportunities being given to me, because I might now know if there is something in that experience that will help me and I can use in the future" (R8). The value of self-reliance and self-discipline emerged in the participants' sharing, as one said, "I set the things that I want to accomplish, and it is up to me on how to work it out" (R15).

**Outcomes**

Development in physical, psycho-emotional, social, spiritual, and academic areas through the various strategies resulted in participants' holistic growth, as supported by this statement, "well-being is essential for life because having a positive well-being will have a domino effect on other aspects" (R6). She added, "It is a major factor on how you really present yourself, on how you really do things, on how you deal with situations, circumstances, with other people" (R6). However, there is a need for flexibility and diversification in employing strategies to significantly develop the different dimensions of well-being (Ruini & Fava, 2012).



**Figure 1.** The BLOOMS Well-being Model

**5.0. Conclusion**

This grounded theory study introduced the BLOOMS Model of Well-being that can contribute to the existing knowledge on Filipino Psychology and serve as a resource for further exploration in positive psychology. Also, mental health professionals can utilize the findings to develop a culturally sensitive positive intervention program for university students. Lastly, data from this study can help in guiding higher educational institutions in formulating mental health policies and programs.

This research presented an exploratory model on well-being and did not claim to be a primary model. Exploration and theory-building were limited to the data gathered from the selected sample from particular private universities, thus, restricting the study's generalizability. The scope of this research was also limited by participants' characteristics, ages 18 to 25 years, and studying in the

urban setting. This development period characterized by preoccupation with their university life could have influenced the emergence of the academic dimension in the proposed model. All of the participants were engaged in online classes and exposed to digital tools and social media, which may have contributed to the surfacing of the digital environment as a significant external factor influencing well-being. Also, this research conducted the interviews during the COVID-19 pandemic, which could highlight the role of society's current state to participants' well-being. The grounded theory method required the researcher to reflect on the data; thus, this study could not avoid researcher-induced bias. However, the bias effect was minimized by reviewing constructed categories involving the critical friend technique through peer debriefing.

This present investigation calls for grounded theory research on well-being in the future to verify and extend the BLOOMS Well-being Model, including participants from rural areas. In addition, this study recommends that further research employ samples from other educational contexts, such as secondary and post-graduate levels. Finally, this study suggests additional qualitative studies to focus on models of well-being on other populations such as parents, faculty members, and mental health professionals.

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