
Original Paper

Faculty and Student Flourishing at a Regional University: A Preliminary Study

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Abstract

The assessment of university well-being requires attention to both positive functioning and areas of strain within the campus environment. This preliminary descriptive study examined faculty and student flourishing at a regional public university in the southwestern United States. A Qualtrics survey was administered over the course of one academic semester and yielded 147 responses from participants representing multiple colleges and roles across the institution. The survey included the Flourishing Scale, the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience, and the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form, along with two supplemental items addressing isolation and self-doubt. The clearest descriptive findings available in the present preliminary report came from the Flourishing Scale and the supplementary distress indicators. Results suggested generally positive perceptions of competence, contribution, and engagement, while also revealing meaningful levels of isolation, self-doubt, lower optimism, and lower perceived respect for a notable subgroup of respondents. These findings suggest that the campus climate included meaningful strengths, but not uniformly across all dimensions of well-being. The study offers an initial institutional snapshot and supports the value of ongoing attention to belonging, connection, and psychosocial support in higher education settings.

Keywords: flourishing, higher education, well-being, faculty, students, university climate

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Universities are complex organizations in which academic performance, institutional culture, interpersonal relationships, and individual well-being are deeply interconnected. Although higher education institutions often evaluate success through enrollment, retention, graduation, and accreditation outcomes, the day-to-day experience of flourishing among students and faculty also deserves systematic attention. A university may appear institutionally stable while still containing pockets of isolation, discouragement, and diminished belonging.

In the well-being literature, flourishing refers to more than the absence of distress. Diener et al. (2010) described flourishing as a brief summary of self-perceived success in important domains such as purpose, relationships, competence, self-regard, and optimism. Similarly, Keyes (2002) conceptualized mental health along a continuum ranging from languishing to flourishing, arguing that positive functioning should be assessed in its own right rather than inferred from the absence of disorder. This perspective is especially relevant to universities, where members of the campus community may appear productive on the surface while still experiencing significant emotional or social strain.

The present study was designed as an initial descriptive examination of well-being at a regional public university in the southwestern United States. The intent was not to provide a definitive institutional diagnosis, but rather to generate a preliminary portrait of how respondents viewed meaning, engagement, competence, social support, and selected indicators of distress. Because this was an exploratory first effort, the study emphasized descriptive patterns that could inform campus reflection and future institutional action.

Review of Literature

Contemporary work on flourishing in psychology emphasizes that positive functioning includes emotional, psychological, and social dimensions. Diener et al. (2010) developed the Flourishing Scale as

a concise eight-item measure of perceived success in areas such as meaning, supportive relationships, engagement, contribution to others, competence, optimism, and respect. In the same study, they introduced the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE) as a brief instrument for capturing the frequency of positive and negative feelings over time.

Keyes' model of complete mental health further expanded the conceptualization of flourishing by distinguishing positive mental health from the mere absence of psychopathology. In that framework, flourishing involves emotional well-being, psychological well-being, and social well-being, whereas languishing reflects diminished functioning across those areas (Keyes, 2002). Later work on the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF) demonstrated that the construct can be assessed efficiently and with strong psychometric support across diverse populations (Keyes et al., 2008; Lamers et al., 2011). The two-continua model also underscores that mental illness and mental health are related but distinct dimensions, which means that positive functioning cannot be reduced to the simple absence of symptoms (Westerhof & Keyes, 2010).

Taken together, these measures provide a useful framework for examining university life. A campus climate may include high levels of competence and engagement while still leaving some individuals feeling disconnected, doubtful, or less hopeful about the future. For that reason, a descriptive campus study should attend to both strengths and strain rather than assuming that one dimension fully captures the other.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine faculty and student flourishing at a regional university using brief well-being measures and supplementary distress indicators. More specifically, the study asked: (a) What do aggregate descriptive results suggest about flourishing among respondents at the university? (b) Which dimensions appear comparatively stronger or weaker in this preliminary dataset? and (c) Do the descriptive findings suggest areas of concern that merit institutional attention?

Method

Participants

A total of 147 individuals responded to the survey. Respondents represented multiple colleges within the university and included undergraduate students, graduate students, and faculty members. Because this manuscript is intended as a preliminary descriptive report, the findings are presented in aggregate form rather than through extensive subgroup analysis.

Measures

The survey included three established well-being instruments. First, the Flourishing Scale (Diener et al., 2010) is an eight-item measure assessing perceived success in areas such as meaning and purpose, supportive relationships, engagement, contribution to others, competence, positive self-regard, optimism, and respect. Items are rated on a seven-point agreement scale, with higher values reflecting stronger endorsement of flourishing-related experiences.

Second, the Scale of Positive and Negative Experience (SPANE; Diener et al., 2010) is a 12-item measure that captures the frequency of positive and negative feelings over the previous four weeks. Respondents rate how often they experienced specific feelings on a five-point scale ranging from very rarely or never to very often or always.

Third, the Mental Health Continuum–Short Form (MHC-SF) is a 14-item measure assessing emotional, psychological, and social well-being (Keyes et al., 2008; Lamers et al., 2011). Respondents report the frequency with which they experienced specific states of well-being using a six-point response format.

In addition to those measures, the survey included two supplemental items for local descriptive purposes: one item addressing feelings of isolation and one item addressing doubt in managing important life demands.

Procedure

The instrument was administered through Qualtrics over the course of one academic semester. The survey

was designed to provide an initial institutional snapshot of faculty and student well-being. Responses were summarized descriptively. In the present manuscript, emphasis is placed on the most stable aggregate findings available from the Flourishing Scale and the supplementary distress items.

Data Analysis

The analysis was descriptive in nature. For Flourishing Scale items, the primary summary indicator was the proportion of respondents selecting the upper end of the response scale, operationalized here as agreement or strong agreement. For the two supplemental distress items, mean values and general response-pattern descriptions were examined. Given the exploratory purpose of the study, the focus remained on broad patterns rather than inferential comparisons.

Results

The preliminary descriptive findings suggested a mixed but generally positive pattern. Available Flourishing Scale indicators showed especially strong endorsement for competence and the perceived ability to contribute to the well-being of others.

At the same time, optimism about the future and perceived respect were endorsed less strongly, and supplemental distress indicators suggested that a substantial minority of respondents experienced isolation or continuing self-doubt.

Table 1. Available Preliminary Flourishing Indicators

Indicator	% Agree or Strongly Agree
My social relationships are supportive and rewarding	62%
I am engaged and interested in my daily activities	64%
I actively contribute to the happiness and well-being of others	68%
I am competent and capable in the activities that are important to me	81%
I am a good person and live a good life	72%
I am optimistic about my future	60%
People respect me	55%

Note. These are the item-level proportions reported in the available preliminary summary.

As shown in Table 1, the highest reported endorsement was for competence in activities that matter to respondents (81%). Endorsement was also relatively strong for living a good life (72%), contributing to others' well-being (68%), and remaining engaged in daily activities (64%). By contrast, optimism about the future (60%) and perceived respect from others (55%) were comparatively lower, suggesting that positive functioning was present, but not equally strong across all domains.

Table 2. Supplementary Distress Indicators

Item	Mean	Preliminary Pattern
I often feel isolated from others	3.92	About 38% fell in the lower-distress range
I frequently doubt my ability to manage important things in life	3.39	About 54% reported lower self-doubt

Note. The narrative descriptions in the third column reproduce the broad response patterns retained in the preliminary summary.

The two supplemental items complicate any overly positive reading of the campus climate. The mean for feeling isolated from others was 3.92, and only about 38% of respondents were described as falling in the lower-distress range on that item. The mean for self-doubt regarding the management of important life demands was 3.39, with about 54% reporting lower self-doubt. These findings suggest that even within a generally positive descriptive profile, a meaningful portion of respondents experienced vulnerability in everyday functioning and social connection.

Although the survey also included the SPANE and the MHC-SF, the current preliminary report emphasizes the clearest descriptive findings available from the retained institutional summary. Full reporting of those additional scales in a disaggregated fashion would assist in interpreting and facilitating our understanding of the differences between undergraduate, graduate and faculty respondents.

Discussion

This preliminary study suggests that respondents at a regional university reported meaningful strengths in several domains associated with flourishing.

The strongest available indicator concerned competence, which implies that many respondents felt capable in activities that mattered to them. Endorsement was also relatively strong for contribution to others, living a good life, and engagement in daily activities. Those patterns point to an institutional environment in which many individuals saw themselves as functioning productively and purposefully.

At the same time, the results also revealed clear limitations in that positive picture. Optimism about the future and the perception of “being respected” were less strongly endorsed than competence or contribution. Even more important, the supplemental distress items suggest that a notable subgroup of respondents experienced isolation and persistent doubt about managing important demands. This combination is important because it underscores a central insight in the flourishing literature: positive functioning and strain can coexist within the same setting and, at times, within the same individuals.

For institutional leaders, the findings highlight the need to think about flourishing as both an individual and organizational concern. Universities often emphasize academic progress, productivity, and operational outcomes, but campus climate also depends on whether people feel socially anchored and respected. The lower endorsement of respect and optimism, together with the elevated isolation indicator, suggests that belonging and interpersonal climate merit attention alongside traditional academic indicators.

Implications

Even as a preliminary study, the results suggest several practical implications for higher education. First, institutions may benefit from paying closer attention to social connection and belonging, particularly for populations that may be structurally or socially more vulnerable to isolation. Second, campus well-being efforts should not focus exclusively on crisis or pathology; they should also seek to strengthen meaning, engagement, optimism, and recognition. Third, periodic well-being assessment can help institutions identify whether campus strengths are broadly shared or unevenly distributed.

As there is not likely to be a direct follow-up study of this same sample or setting, the value of the present manuscript lies in documenting an initial institutional snapshot and in offering a model for similar descriptive work at other regional universities. Replication in comparable settings would help determine whether the patterns observed here reflect a broader higher education trend or features more specific to this institutional context.

Limitations

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study was conducted at a single institution, which limits generalizability. Second, the analysis was descriptive and relied on aggregate summaries rather than inferential testing. Third, the manuscript does not present the full set of subgroup breakdowns or complete item-level reporting for every instrument included in the survey. Fourth, all findings were based on self-report data collected at one point in time, which means the results should be interpreted as perceptions rather than objective indicators of institutional conditions.

These limitations do not negate the usefulness of the study, but they do reinforce its preliminary character. The manuscript is best understood as an exploratory institutional portrait rather than a definitive account of well-being at the university. The authors did not examine a good deal of the data and a possible second manuscript could be published in the future after a disaggregation of the data is done, or a more in depth exploration of a specific population of interest.

Conclusion

Faculty and student flourishing at a university cannot be understood solely through performance metrics, enrollment trends, or accreditation indicators. It also requires attention to whether members of the campus community experience meaning, competence, engagement, social support, optimism, and respect. In this preliminary study, respondents at a regional university showed evidence of several strengths, especially in competence and contribution to others, but the findings also revealed meaningful concerns related to isolation, self-doubt, optimism, and perceived respect. As a result, the study points toward a balanced conclusion: this campus displayed signs of flourishing, but that flourishing was incomplete, and unevenly distributed. That conclusion alone makes the study worth reporting.

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