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Meta-Analysis of UW Resilience Lab Organizational Culture of Well-being

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How does the University of Washington Resilience Lab embody and implement its values and frameworks for well-being internally?

Institutions of higher education have been increasingly concerned with the mental well-being of students, staff, and faculty, resulting in the creation of centers such as the University of Washington Resilience Lab (UWRL). Leaning on traditionally micro focused mental health modalities such as DBT and mindfulness, the UWRL expands these modalities into mezzo and macro spheres by engaging the impacts of culture on well-being. To that end, this study attempts to examine how the UWRL as an organization embodies and implements its values and frameworks for well-being internally. Using 7 individual semi-structured interviews with Lab members, and two focus group sessions involving a SWOT analysis of the Lab's organizational culture, this study hopes to explore how the UWRL reflects the Foundations for Student Well-Being within itself.

Background

In the Fall of 2020, the UWRL published the Well-Being for Life and Learning Guidebook, a new resource for instructors to aid them in designing learning environments that promote well-being. A key component of the Guidebook is "The Foundations for Advancing Student Well-Being" which include **teaching for equity and access**, **nurturing connection**, **building resilience coping skills**, and **connecting to the environment**. These foundations were co-created by instructors, staff, and students across the three University of Washington (UW) campuses and across disciplines.

The publication of the Guidebook during the COVID-19 pandemic and racial and political uprising in the United States, met a need for social and emotional learning tools, skills, and practices that has only been increasing and expanding in higher education settings and beyond.

Using the UWRL as a non-classroom site and Lab members as a sample, this study is a preliminary step in translating these foundations and supportive practices to expand efforts to bolster a culture of well-being beyond the classroom. To start, this looks at how the UWRL implements practices around the Foundations for Advancing Student Well-Being as they pertain to a workplace that includes undergraduate and graduate students, and professional staff.

Research Methods

Using voluntary purposive sampling, 7 Lab members participated in interviews including 1 full-time paid professional staff member, 1 part-time paid staff member, 1 part-time paid undergraduate student, 1 part-time paid graduate student, 1 unpaid graduate student intern, and 2 unpaid undergraduate student advisors.

The four Foundations from the Well-Being for Life and Learning Guidebook were explored through semi-structured interviews with Lab members and through focus groups conducting "SWOT" (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) analyses done by staff during a staff meeting. Some structured interview questions included:

- Please share how and why you became involved with the UW Resilience Lab and how your relationship with the lab evolved?
- What did/does a culture of well-being look like at the lab? How has this compared to your other experiences at the UW?
- How have you seen the impacts of your work change the culture of well-being at the Resilience Lab?
- What have you learned about your own well-being through your journey with the lab?
- What is your dream for well-being at UW?

The four Foundations will serve as a thematic framework for deductive coding of interviews. Because this existing framework was originally intended to serve instructors, this process will serve to apply the framework to a workspace. Coding for the focus group SWOT analysis will utilize inductive coding for each category of SWOT and will be done with a professional staff member.

Key Findings

This study was able to answer the question "How does the University of Washington Resilience Lab embody and implement its values and frameworks for well-being internally?" by addressing each of the four foundations established by the Lab. Overall, all participants shared experiences of improved well-being in engagement with the lab. Two key factors played major roles in contributing to this experience: organizational centering of individual needs and Lab relationships modeled by Lab leadership.

> **Equity and Access:** Participants covered authenticity, internal and external equity, the role of dissent in equity work, values alignment, the connections between anti-oppression and well-being, Lab members' identities as strengths, and how the Lab has influenced their own sense of equity and well-being. Lab members spoke to the role of oppression in preventing folks from experiencing well-being, and how taking care of ourselves allows us to do the work of well-being.

> **Nurturing Connection:** Where more traditional constructs around "professionalism" have often led colleagues to attempt to compartmentalize what is personal vs. what is professional, relations within the Lab allowed for vulnerability, openness, and support. Additionally, the concepts of a "community of care" and "collective wellness" (especially in the context of racial trauma, resilience, and healing) arose in the interviews

> **Resilience Coping:** Lab members spoke about integrating mindfulness and well-being practices learned through Lab engagement. They also indicated increased awareness and commitment to their own well-being that was supported by the Lab community.

> **Connecting to the Environment:** While the natural environment did not show up in interviews, staff noted in the SWOT analysis that the lack of shared physical space during the COVID-19 pandemic was a hinderance to teamwork.

> **Leadership:** Lab leadership was highlighted in both the interviews and SWOT analysis. All interviews spoke to the kind of care that was felt from Lab leadership, and how this set a model for what relationships in the Lab should look like. The adaptive leadership style embodied by Lab leadership made space for dissent as well as contributions of all capacities.

Implications

Participants named that the process of reflecting on our own practices cultivated a culture of well-being: "asking the lab to reflect on how they are creating a culture of well-being *is* creating a culture of well-being." To that end, this practice of interviewing Lab members and completing a SWOT analysis as a team could be beneficial to integrate into annual end-of-year reflections. The process of interviewing Lab members, rather than capturing data through a survey allowed for the process to reflect "Nurturing Connection," however these interviews do not capture change over time or where Lab members started in their understandings of well-being at the beginning of their time with the Lab. Engaging Lab members across the year using a variety of methods such a autoethnographic writings, resilience coping skill building focus groups, or have Lab members interview one another.

The Lab was well established in practicing "Nurturing Connection" and "Resilience Coping", was emerging in establishing practices of "Equity & Access," and was needing to establish more practices related to "Connecting to the Environment." With these results, the Lab may not only set goals for itself in the coming academic year but might also share out practices that are supporting the well-being of staff and Lab members. The Lab should continue to expand of "Equity & Access" efforts and prioritize deepening work toward "Connecting to the Environment".

There was significant overlap between the four Foundations; for example, participants spoke to two or more Foundations in the same response. This implies that the Foundations are permeable or intertwined and cannot be thought of in isolation. Working at the intersection of these foundations may offer the ease in engagement and improvement.

While Lab members are not immune to mental health struggles, the kind of community support they receive at the Lab has supported their well-being. It may serve the Lab to capture informal practices conducted in support of mental health of Lab members. Just as Lab members sought written policies on paid vs. unpaid work in the SWOT analysis, written norms may help formalize informal practices and help the Lab inform other workplaces on campus.

Learn more about the UW Resilience Lab at https://wellbeing.uw.edu/unit/resilience-lab/