

# Student Leader's Well-being in Post-Pandemic

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## ABSTRACT

Promoting student well-being has recently appeared as a critical educational concern for educational systems worldwide due to its wide-reaching benefits. Student well-being can be regarded as an enabling condition for successful learning in school and an important outcome of 21st-century education. Students with a higher sense of well-being engage better at school and later on as adults by gaining employment, leading a socially engaged life, and contributing to the nation. This study aimed to describe the well being of student leaders in the post pandemic. It used the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-being that measures five areas namely: Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness and Happiness. The results revealed that student leaders have a High level of Well-being, and among the different areas, they scored high in Connectedness while low in Optimism. The researchers recommend that programs to promote optimism among our student leaders should be considered in order to appease their feelings of uncertainty brought about by the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Student Leader's well-being, program design for well-being, post-pandemic program development

## INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Positive psychology is becoming increasingly important at the individual, community, national, and international levels, with a specific focus on monitoring and building subjective psychological well-being. From the perspective of positive psychology, good functioning is more than the absence of mental illness; it focuses on what goes right, not simply what goes wrong (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It is certainly important to deal with problems, but greater gain may arise from cultivating personal strengths. Measurement plays a key role, as "what we measure affects what we do" (Stiglitz, Sen, & Fitoussi, 2009, p. 7). Much of the focus on the measurement of positive psychological function has focused on adults; children and adolescents have unique perspectives and can be key informants (Casas, 2011). We thus introduce the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-being, which assesses five positive psychological characteristics: Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness.

Adolescence is a crucial period for developing social and emotional habits important for mental well-being. These include adopting healthy sleep patterns; exercising regularly; developing coping, problem-solving, and interpersonal skills; and learning to manage emotions. Protective and supportive environments in the family, at school and in the wider community are important. They need support from the individuals and institutions around them to promote their immediate well-being and their longer-term positive development (WHO, 2023).

The study gives the researchers an idea of the current well-being of the student leaders. It presented different literature related to the study, the limitations and the gap that it seeks to further address. From among the many student leaders of the University, we chose a good number to run the questionnaires. Using the EPOCH Model of Adolescence Well-Being instrument, we were able to measure the thoughts and feelings of students as they experienced the pandemic. With the five areas of the instruments, it gives the researchers a picture of where the student leaders are high and it also shows what areas in a student's well-being at

present would need intervention. In this study, the researchers also intend to provide recommendations on how the school administration can support students in all areas of well-being so they can be productive students of the university.

## Well-being

In recent years, the importance of well-being and the quality of life concept has grown and extended into many areas. There are numerous definitions of these, and other terms, such as satisfaction and happiness, that, as Veenhoven (2000) points out, have traditionally been used interchangeably. There is, however, nowadays a consensus that quality of life refers to both objective and subjective elements and reflects both the living conditions and the perceptions of individuals (Casas, 2004). Moyano-Díaz and Ramos-Alvarado (2007) also assume an integrative perspective based on a model where the quality of life measure is divided into an objective component that refers to a person's ability to access goods and services and a subjective one that incorporates the concept of subjective well-being, which, in turn, is divided into a cognitive and an affective component. In this case, the cognitive focuses on satisfaction (both global and in terms of specific domains), while the affective includes both positive and negative effects.

## Well-being Post-Pandemic

*Promoting student well-being has recently emerged as a critical educational agenda item for educational systems worldwide due to its wide-reaching benefits (Joing et al., 2020).* Student well-being can be considered an enabling condition for successful learning in school and an essential outcome of 21st-century education (Govorova et al., 2020). Students with a higher sense of well-being perform better at school and later on as adults by gaining employment, leading a socially engaged life, and contributing to the nation (Cárdenas et al., 2022; O'Brien & O'Shea, 2017; Price and McCallum, 2016). Although the importance of student well-being has been recognized unequivocally (Tobia et al., 2019), researchers have not reached a shared understanding of what student well-being entails. Researchers, however, all agree that it is a multidimensional concept incorporating multiple domains (Danker et al., 2019; Soutter et al., 2014; Svane et al., 2019).

With the emergence of student well-being as a priority area in educational policy and practice, efforts to measure and monitor student well-being have increased (Svane et al., 2019), along with the number of student well-being domains being proposed. Presently, a lack of consensus exists about what set of domains is appropriate to investigate and understand student well-being, resulting in a fragmented body of work (Danker et al., 2016; Svane et al., 2019). Such a lack of consensus is a significant barrier to developing, implementing, and evaluating programs to improve students' well-being. The proliferation of proposed domains is often due to variations in conceptualizing the construct. Different conceptualizations lead to the selection of different domains.

Historically, the concept of well-being has been built upon two distinct philosophical perspectives: the hedonic and eudaimonic views. Those who favor a hedonic view conceptualize well-being as the state of feeling good and focus on cognitive and affective domains (Keyes & Annas, 2009). The cognitive domain represents satisfaction with school and life, whereas the affective domain represents school-related positive (e.g., joy) and negative affect (e.g., anxiety). Proponents of the eudaimonic view often conceptualize well-being as functioning well at school and focus on a range of domains representing optimal student functioning, such as school engagement (Thorsteinsen & Vittersø, 2018). However, neither a hedonic nor a eudaimonic view alone can comprehensively capture or assess the complex nature of student well-being (Thorsteinsen & Vittersø, 2018).

There is a need for an understanding of the existing literature to target the most critical domains for holistic student well-being and provide effective intervention to support the domains in which students need the

most support. It is also more critical than ever before, as currently, the well-being of school-aged students is grossly affected by the global pandemic COVID-19 (Dean Schwartz et al., 2021; Golberstein et al., 2019; Van Lancker & Parolin, 2020). Therefore, it is timely to conduct a study exploring the domains of student well-being to assist in developing formation programs and targeting supports and resources to bolster it.

Although past efforts have reviewed the existing literature on student well-being, their purposes have varied. This study sought to identify the domains of student well-being to develop an appropriate intervention. Fraillon (2004) operationalized student well-being as their effective student functioning in school. Later, Noble et al. (2008) focused on mapping pathways (e.g. strength-based approach) to achieving student well-being. However, it is ambitious to achieve student well-being leaving aside the question of what constitutes the construct of student well-being. Danker et al. (2016) reviewed the existing literature to locate domains specifically relevant to the well-being of students with autism. More recently, Govender et al. (2019) did a systematic review on South African young people's well-being, but their review focused on well-being in a general life context. None of the above studies sought to review the domains or indicators of student well-being, mainly focusing on the school context and exploring students' perspectives. The limitation in the scope of the previous reviews indicates the gap for a review to map the body of evidence on domains of student well-being.

Studies on student leaders' well-being in the aftermath of the epidemic is scarce. While research on school leadership during the pandemic have been conducted, as follows: Dykstra-Lathrop (2022); Wharton-Beck, Chou, Gilbert, Johnson, & Beck (2022); Superville (2022); and Brown, Wang, Lee, & Childs (2023).

The majority of these concentrated on school administrators and principals. According to a recent poll, principals of secondary schools frequently deal with stress related to their jobs, particularly when it comes to worries about the welfare of their staff and students (Superville, 2022). Nevertheless, the well-being of student leaders is not particularly covered by this study. Nearly all students reported having some difficulties with their mental health and well-being during the pandemic, according to another study (Gee, Asmundson, & Vang, 2023).

Early research revealed differences based on race, ethnicity, LGBTQ+ identity. This study emphasizes the effects of the pandemic on students' mental health and well-being even if it does not specifically focus on student leaders. Furthermore, recent research from the testing company NWEA discovered that pupils are not improving quickly enough in math and reading to offset the pandemic's academic effects, and that the academic inequalities between various demographic groups are getting wider (Schwartz, 2023). This report emphasizes the difficulties that students are having in the post-pandemic phase, even though it does not particularly target the well-being of student leaders. Overall, further research is needed to better understand how student leaders do throughout the post-pandemic phase. The current study focuses on student leaders and how they fared during the difficult changes brought about by the post-pandemic.

### **The EPOCH Model of Adolescent Well-being**

The current theoretical EPOCH model arises from Seligman's (2011) PERMA theory of flourishing. Seligman defines well-being in terms of five separate but interrelated domains: Positive emotion, Engagement, positive Relationships with others, a sense of Meaning or purpose in life, and Accomplishment. Recent studies have provided support for the model (Hone, Jarden, Schofield, & Duncan, 2014; Kern, Waters, Adler, & White, in press; Kern, Waters, White, & Adler, 2014), and Butler and Kern (2014) developed the PERMA-Profler as a brief measure of flourishing for adults. Extending the PERMA model to adolescents, the theoretical model defines five positive characteristics in youth that we believe influence the PERMA domains in adulthood. That is, the model focuses on positive adolescent characteristics that support adult flourishing as defined by Seligman's model.

The EPOCH model, developed by Kern et al. (2015), is based on Seligman's (2011) understanding of well-being as a multidimensional concept known as PERMA, which encompasses Positive Emotions, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. When applying the PERMA model to adolescents, the factor structure differed from that of adults. For example, items related to Meaning were found to load onto the Relationships factor for adolescents (Kern et al., 2015). The EPOCH model focuses on five factors: Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness, and it specifically addresses the well-being of individuals aged 10-18. Engagement refers to being fully absorbed in an activity, often referred to as "flow" at very high levels (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). Perseverance involves persisting with tasks and pursuing goals despite obstacles, while Optimism relates to positive feelings about the future, hopefulness, and confidence. Connectedness refers to having friends and receiving care, while Happiness refers to a general sense of positive mood and well-being (Kern et al., 2016).

Furthermore, a qualitative study on school-related well-being by Holzer et al. (2021) found that the multidimensional EPOCH model, when adapted to the school context, serves as an appropriate framework for understanding the components of well-being reported by students and teachers. Statements from students and teachers were categorized within the EPOCH framework, with Connectedness, Happiness, and Engagement being the most frequently addressed categories. Perseverance and Optimism were less commonly mentioned, possibly due to the questionnaire's focus on observable behaviors, which makes it more challenging to assess Perseverance and Optimism.

However, it should be noted that the EPOCH model primarily addresses adolescents' general well-being, lacking a specific focus on contextual factors. While it allows for conclusions regarding overall well-being, it does not provide a means to identify concrete resources or specific intervention needs within particular settings, such as the school environment.

The aim of this study was to capitalize on the advantages of the EPOCH model while addressing the need for context-specificity. The researchers translated the EPOCH measurement and adapted it to the school context, providing a useful multidimensional measurement tool for assessing students' well-being that integrates both hedonic and eudaimonic indicators of well-being.

The model is composed of five factors: Engagement, Perseverance, Optimism, Connectedness, and Happiness (EPOCH). By *Engagement*, we mean the capacity to become absorbed in and focused on what one is doing, as well as involvement and interest in life activities and tasks. Very high levels of engagement have been referred to as "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997). *Perseverance* refers to the ability to pursue one's goals to completion, even in the face of obstacles. It is a sub-facet of the Big Five personality trait of conscientiousness and comprises the drive component of "grit" (which includes both perseverance and passion for long-term goals; Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). *Optimism* is characterized by hopefulness and confidence about the future, a tendency to take a favorable view of things, and an explanatory style marked by evaluating negative events as temporary, external, and specific to the situation. *Connectedness* refers to the sense that one has satisfying relationships with others, believing that one is cared for, loved, esteemed, and valued, and providing friendship or support to others. *Happiness* is conceptualized as steady states of positive mood and feeling content with one's life, rather than momentary emotion.

The model complements PYD models and measures. Although the two perspectives overlap to a significant degree, there are also important differences between them. First, PYD incorporates a systems perspective, whereas our model, stemming from the positive psychology perspective, focuses on individual strengths (Lerner et al., 2009). Second, our definition of positive functioning is deliberately non-developmental, such that normative immaturity is not spuriously associated with lower well-being. Third, whereas models of PYD focus mainly on characteristics that promote achievement, engagement, and adjustment, our model

focuses on characteristics that promote Seligman's PERMA model. Finally, in contrast to prevailing models of PYD, our model ignores context-specificity. Thus, we do not distinguish, for instance, between a sense of engagement that describes a student's experience. That is, it is the capacity to become engaged or the capacity to connect with others, not what one is engaged in or who a youth connects with, that marks positive psychological functioning. In this sense, the model differs substantially from prevailing models of PYD, which explicitly value some sorts of activities (e.g., community service) over others (e.g., surfing the Internet).

It is expected that adolescent engagement, perseverance, optimism, connectedness, and happiness will foster PERMA, physical health, and other positive outcomes in adulthood, and therefore are valuable to measure and cultivate. Although few studies have considered the specific EPOCH domains as predictors of positive adult outcomes, there is some support in the literature. For example, civic engagement in at-risk youth is related to higher life satisfaction, greater educational attainment and lower rates of arrest in young adulthood (Chan, Ou, & Reynolds, 2014). Across four studies, individuals high in perseverance were more likely to graduate from school, stay in their jobs, and remain married (Eskreis-Winkler, Shulman, Beal, & Duckworth, 2014). Optimism has been related to greater satisfaction with life, more effective coping strategies, fewer symptoms of depression and psychological distress, better physical health, longer life, lower rates of cardiovascular disease, and better social relationships (Carver, Scheier, & Segerstrom, 2010). Across a 15-year period, adolescent social connectedness predicted greater adult well-being (Olsson, McGee, Nada-Raja, & Williams, 2013). Adolescent happiness is related to better self-rated health and few risky behaviors in young adulthood, independently from depressive symptoms (Hoyt, Chase-Lansdale, McDade, & Adam, 2012).

## METHODOLOGY

The quantitative approach was used, specifically the descriptive design, in collecting and analyzing the data. Ethridge (2004) stated that descriptive studies may be characterized as simply the attempt to determine, describe or identify what is. Descriptive research is aimed at casting light on current issues or problems through a process of data collection that enables them to describe the situation more completely than was possible without employing this method (Fox & Bayat, 2007).

There are a total of 107 student leaders, evenly distributed between males and females, aged 18 to 21, who were invited to take part in the questionnaire. These individuals come from various organizations within De La Salle University, including the University Student Government (USG), the Council of Student Organizations (CSO), and Special Groups under the Office of Student Leadership, Involvement, Formation, and Empowerment (SLIFE). Out of the 107 student leaders who were invited to participate in the questionnaire, only 95 provided responses.

The response rate of 88.79% indicates a relatively high level of engagement from the target groups. Having a response rate close to 90% suggests that the majority of the invited leaders actively participated in answering the questionnaire.

### Profile of Students

The respondents are 18 to 21 years of age and are currently enrolled at the time of this study. A total of 95 participants responded with a balanced count of male and female respondents. They are student leaders of the University Student Government (USG), the Council of Student Organizations (CSO) and the Office of Student Leadership, Involvement, Formation and Empowerment (SLIFE) Special Groups. An introductory message is initially presented in the questionnaire explaining the study's rationale and the importance of voluntary participation. Consent was obtained.

## Instrument

To measure well-being according to the EPOCH model, the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-Being (Kern et al., 2016) questionnaire was developed. It consists of 20 items, with four items for each EPOCH domain, rated on a five-point scale. Validation studies (Kern et al., 2015, 2016) have supported the five-factor structure of the EPOCH model, which showed moderate inter-correlations between the factors. In addition to the individual factor scores, the authors recommend calculating an overall psychological function score as the average of all five-factor scores. When exploring the nomological network, well-being demonstrated only weak to moderate correlations with measures of ill-being, supporting the notion that well-being encompasses more than just the absence of ill-being (Kern et al., 2016).

The researchers utilized the EPOCH Measure of Adolescent Well-being, which is currently being developed as a multidimensional measure of youth flourishing. This measure evaluates engagement, perseverance, optimism, connection to others, and happiness. It includes 12 items from the subscales of engagement, perseverance, and connectedness. The measure is designed to characterize and describe different aspects of adolescent psychological function, but does not provide specific thresholds or diagnostic criteria. The researchers created an online survey questionnaire to describe the student leader's well-being.

The current measure passed tests for factor structure, internal and test-retest reliability, convergent and discriminant validity, and predictive validity. However, more research is required to validate the measure further, expand its application to other population groups, and determine how well it predicts long-term outcomes. As a quick multi-dimensional exam, the EPOCH measure adds significantly to batteries intended to evaluate positive psychological functioning in adolescents and helps to test and apply well-being theory empirically. The five-factor, inter-correlated model was supported by a confirmatory factor analysis. For all EPOCH subscales (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .76-.88$  and McDonald's  $\omega = .77-.88$ ), the internal consistency was good. Replicating correlations between the five EPOCH subscales and both positive (coping self-efficacy) and negative (DASS-21) components helped to confirm the criterion validity (Maurer, Daukantait?, & Hoff, 2021).

The questionnaire was prepared using Google forms and distributed online by sharing the target respondents' links.

The thoughts and feelings of the respondents were explored by asking them about their thoughts and feelings on their well-being.

Data obtained from the instrument were kept in the Google drive of the proponents subject to the data privacy guidelines of the University.

## Data Analysis

The Microsoft Excel was used to analyze the data obtained from the instruments. The mean of each item was calculated and an excel spreadsheet of EPOCH profile depicting participants' well-being. Particularly, this study utilized mean, percentage and standard deviation to present the information gathered for the descriptive questions in the study.

A total of 95 answered the tool. The responses of the participants were obtained from the shared google forms, which were participated by 95 student leaders across the different student groups under the Office of Student LIFE. The survey questionnaire concerns their feelings and perception of their actual state of well-being.

## RESULTS

The main goal of the present study was to discuss the findings concerning the levels of well-being of the student leaders from De La Salle University.

Based on the results of EPOCH Adolescent Well-being, it appears that the overall well-being of student leaders reported a High level of well-being as shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Scores of Students' Well-being

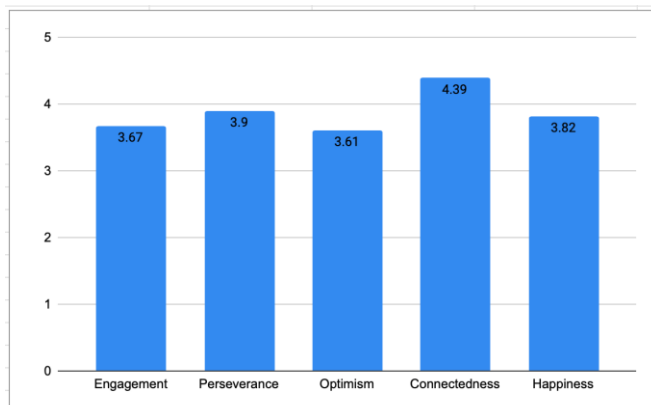


Figure 1 shows the average scores of each EPOCH measure. It yielded an overall well-being average of 3.88, on a scale from zero to five. Across the five domains of well-being, it indicated the following scores respectively: Engagement ( $M=3.67$ ;  $SD=0.25$ ); Perseverance ( $M=3.9$ ;  $SD=0.23$ ); Optimism ( $M=3.61$ ;  $SD=0.36$ ); Connectedness ( $M=4.39$ ;  $SD=0.27$ ); and Happiness ( $M=3.82$ ;  $SD=0.16$ ).

It seems that the student leader participants rated most favorably on the area of Connectedness having obtained the highest mean score of 4.39. They also reported normal levels of Engagement ( $M=3.67$ ;  $SD=0.25$ ), Happiness ( $M=3.82$ ;  $SD=0.36$ ) and Perseverance ( $M=3.9$ ;  $SD=0.23$ ). However, the student leader participants rated least on Optimism with the lowest mean score of 3.62.

The presented EPOCH scores can help the student leader participants gain self-insights in relation to the baseline measurement of their well-being. It is interesting to note, that the scores do not reflect the totality of their well-being, this is only based on one (1) assessment, which is the EPOCH Measure of Adolescents Well-being.

## DISCUSSION

The results show that the well-being of students are affected by the pandemic. The study reveals that students express the need to be connected with one another. Since the return of student leaders on campus, it is seen that they worked hard and clamoured for the return of the face to face student activities. Their motivation to propose, conduct and facilitate student-initiated activities is so high that the number of on-campus student activities have significantly increased. The innate need of humans to belong and be associated has contributed to the students' longing to be connected with others, most importantly with their peers and classmates. This is also the reason why the scores evidently manifested a high level in terms of connectedness.

On the other hand, the scale reveals a low level of optimism or looking at things positively. The past three years of the pandemic have been a period of uncertainty and lack of security. It is not a period when one

should feel very optimistic. It is a feeling of not being sure of what will happen in the future, and a time when one is not certain of what tomorrow will bring, if upon sleeping, one would still wake up alive or not. Lives of people around us have been taken away by the pandemic, and even the possession of our own lives have become unsure. This may have been a factor that contributed to our student leaders' perception of the days ahead or the future. Their eager anticipation and positive outlook for the future may be affected by this, thus the reason why they scored low in their level of optimism.

In summary, the student leaders' well-being are affected by the recent pandemic and it is evident in areas in the EPOCH scale where they are high or low. The results can be helpful for the student leader participants to know the areas that are lower and higher. They will be able to identify the level of their well-being, and where they would need to improve on. The results may change over time. If they are satisfied with their profile, then they must keep doing things to proactively care for their mental health, aiming for good functioning in the long term.

A limitation of the study is that it covers only a minimal number of student leaders. Considering that the University has several organization leaders, it would be best if there were a significant number of participants. The result does not cover the profile in terms of their tenure as student leaders. Their length of service to their organizations and involvement in extracurricular activities may yield different results in terms of their well-being. In addition, the respondents do not have student leadership experience prior to the pandemic. Students who have prior student leadership stints may have different thoughts and experiences.

According to Butler & Kern (2020), there is no ideal profile. The measure is intended to be descriptive not prescriptive in nature. There is no right or wrong profile and the results most likely vary for different people depending where they are at in life. No one element defines well-being, but each of the EPOCH elements contributes to it.

## CONCLUSION

Being second parents of students, school administrators are duty bound to always be mindful of the current state of their students well-being. It is important in formulating policies and redesigning programs on students' welfare and interventions to increase and maintain students' school engagement. The study would provide more insights to the organizers, module developers, and speakers on what to expect and form students for rigors of the University and their professional life after college.

Since the transition to face-to-face learning this Academic Year, program development may support the co-curricular and extracurricular activities that facilitate active student engagement and connectedness. To end, supportive Student Affairs programs will surely boost students' level of well-being and their level of optimism. It also recommends to frame the intervention following the prevention-based psychology to teach students the skills that will enable them to prevent distress and promotion-based psychology to enable students build congruency and well-being.

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