

“TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR WELL-BEING!”: A CRITIQUE OF NEOLIBERALISM
AND ABLEISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION WELL-BEING INITIATIVES

by

Garrett H. Fojtik
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ABSTRACT

“TAKE CHARGE OF YOUR WELL-BEING!”: A CRITIQUE OF NEOLIBERALISM AND ABLEISM IN HIGHER EDUCATION WELL-BEING INITIATIVES

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Higher education well-being initiatives are in need of analysis within critical scholarship on the neoliberal university, on corporate well-being, and within the field of critical disability studies. Despite the proliferation of well-being initiatives in higher education, which is embedded in systems of neoliberalism and ableism, such an analysis is currently lacking within the aforementioned critical scholarship. Through a multi-method approach that combines content analysis with critical discourse analysis, I examine the ways in which higher education well-being initiatives perpetuate these interlocking hegemonies – neoliberalism and ableism – through their discourses of well-being. Through this analysis, it is evident that higher education well-being initiatives perpetuate notions of individual responsibility and other normative values of neoliberalism, obscuring the harmful systemic conditions in and outside of higher education that impact well-being. These well-being discourses also perpetuate ableist, medicalized notions of well-being

and an uncritical, unnuanced pro-cure politics. They also broadly serve to other students, faculty and staff with mental disabilities. While most higher education well-being initiatives across the spectrum of institutions perpetuate neoliberalism and/or ableism in some way, some Historically Black Colleges and Universities and some Tribal Colleges and Universities demonstrate productive approaches to well-being that are rooted in the meeting of tangible community needs. Additionally, at predominantly white institutions, the co-optation of anti-racist liberation movements is evident as an emergent trend in need of further research. Finally, I argue for an embrace of feminist care ethics, conjoined with a political analysis of oppression, resistance and liberation, as a more meaningful and liberatory framework of care in contrast to the normative discourse of well-being predominant on higher education campuses.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

“Well-being” is a popular buzzword in the neoliberal world of higher education. This is certainly the case at George Mason University, which, in addition to offering an array of well-being services through its Center for the Advancement of Well-Being, proclaims its ambitious goal of becoming the “first well-being university”: a place where all members of its community will “thrive.”¹ This language is not unique to George Mason University, however, and is mirrored by many other higher education institutions in the U.S., over eighty-nine percent of which have implemented at least one well-being program (as of 2017).² On the surface, this trend may appear to be a positive and uplifting undertaking within the higher education system – after all, many scholars have noted that well-being among college students has decreased over recent years.³ However, I argue that these well-being initiatives should not be taken at face value, and in fact, due to their entrenchment in institutions and systems where neoliberal and ableist hegemonies are foundational and omnipresent, they are in need of an in-depth analysis not yet offered within critical scholarship on the neoliberal university, on corporate well-being, or within the field of critical disability studies. The research presented here is my effort to initiate

1. George Mason University, “Well-Being University Initiative.”

2. Watts, “A New Model,” under “A Shared Responsibility.”

3. Baldwin et al., “College Student Wellness,” 1; Reavley and Jorm, “Prevention and Early Intervention,” 133.

an analytical discussion of this topic, which I believe to be a critical issue within George Mason University, the higher education system, and beyond.

I use George Mason University as a reference point here, because it is the institution in which I have been embedded for the last seven years as an undergraduate/graduate student and graduate teaching assistant. My identification of a need for this research stems in large part out of my own experience with “well-being” during these seven years, both in terms of navigating the challenges produced by a neoliberal, ableist higher education institution and in terms of the well-being services and discourses offered by the university. During this time, I have felt a mounting tension between various conflicting and overlapping experiences with well-being. Particularly, I have felt the need to take care of myself and my complex experience of mental health while navigating interlocking systems of neoliberalism and ableism in higher education; the internalization, un-learning and ongoing resistance of the neoliberal, ableist idea that my “well-being” is my own personal responsibility; and higher education’s presentation of “tools” for me to use toward enhancing my well-being, which have been offered without any engagement in the structural transformation necessary to foster a meaningful form of collective care and liberation. Further complicating this experience, I have also engaged in teaching an undergraduate “well-being” course as part of my graduate assistant responsibilities. In attempting to teach this coursework in a way that is subversive of the issues alluded to above (and elucidated in-depth through my analysis in the following chapters), my understanding of the deep entrenchment of neoliberalism and ableism in the very discourse of well-being itself has only been clarified. It is from this

positionality that I engage in the analytical work that follows; work that is also filtered through my experience as white middle-class queer man.

As previously mentioned, there is currently a dearth of scholarship that offers a critical perspective on well-being discourses in higher education. This is despite the presence of such perspectives in relation to K-12 education institutions as well as (non-higher education) business corporations.⁴ Particularly, there is minimal scholarship which critically analyses these discourses through the lenses of anti-neoliberal critique and critical disability studies as they relate to mental disabilities. The absence of this analysis in scholarship on the neoliberal university and in the field of critical disability studies leaves the potentially harmful impacts of higher education well-being initiatives unaddressed, particularly as they may be experienced by students, faculty and staff with disabilities, but also by everyone embedded within higher education. It is for this reason that I engage these dual lenses in my research to elucidate the ways in which the “well-being university” – a term I re-appropriate from George Mason University to reference the current state of higher education where normative well-being initiatives are so prevalent – perpetuates interlocking neoliberal and ableist hegemonies through its discourses of well-being. Ultimately, the goal of this work is to challenge the perpetuation of structural violence against students, faculty and staff marginalized along intersecting lines of dis/ability, race, gender, sexuality and class and the ways in which

4. For examples of critical perspectives on well-being initiatives at K-12 institutions, see Spratt, *Well-Being, Equity and Education*; Anglin-Jaffe, “Reading the ‘Happy Child’”; For examples of critical perspectives on well-being initiatives at business corporations, see Walsh, “A Meta-Critique”; Walsh, “Mindfulness under Neoliberal Governmentality.”

this structural violence may be erased or obscured by discourses of well-being at the neoliberal university and, too, to consider what a meaningful alternative to this well-being framework might look like. In the following literature review, I outline several interrelated themes that are foundational to my own analysis, including neoliberalism, the neoliberal university, corporate well-being in higher education, the neoliberal co-optation of mental health, and insights from critical disability studies that address the construction and medicalization of disability as well as manifestations of ableism in higher education.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

An increasing number of colleges and universities are implementing institutional initiatives targeted at enhancing student, faculty and staff well-being.⁵ While significant scholarship exists which explores well-being initiatives at corporate institutions, not much has been written that critically analyzes such initiatives in the higher education setting.⁶ Particularly, there is a dearth of scholarship that critically analyzes these well-being initiatives in the context of the neoliberalization of higher education and its potential co-option of and negative impact on mental health. As previously mentioned, in this thesis, I seek to critically analyze the ways in which the neoliberal university may contribute to the deterioration of students' mental health while simultaneously co-opting discourses of mental health into its corporate agenda.

In order to elucidate the neoliberal implications of well-being initiatives at higher education institutions, particularly in regard to their framing of and impact on mental health, a few foundational themes must first be outlined. In the following section, I present a brief overview of neoliberalism, paying particular attention to Foucault's theory of neoliberal governmentality, as well as the ways in which neoliberalism contributes to the expansion of social and economic inequalities. Building on that discussion, I then

5. Travia et al., "Framing Well-Being," 1-15.

6. Moore and Piwek, "Regulating Wellbeing," 308-316; O'Reilly, "Seven Ways," 17.

review the literature on the “neoliberal university,” which is the site of my theoretical critique. Next, I review the scholarship on well-being in higher education and, building on the previously outlined scholarship on neoliberalism, offer an overview of critical perspectives on the various neoliberal implications of popular corporate well-being discourses. Finally, I introduce a review of critical disability studies scholarship, exploring critical perspectives on the neoliberal university, ableism and mental health through that lens. This collection of scholarship will serve as the foundation of my own critical analysis of the neoliberal university’s impact on and co-option of mental health within its well-being initiatives.

Neoliberalism

Scholarship on neoliberalism commonly identifies the social/political/economic phenomenon as arising out of liberal capitalism and globalization in the 1970s and 1980s.⁷ The most basic understanding of neoliberalism is that it is a social/political/economic system that favors the market over the state, the private over the public.⁸ Whereas liberalism embraced a higher degree of state intervention, neoliberalism is characterized by a dramatic diminishment of state presence in the market, limiting it to the maintenance and production of competition, which, according to neoliberal ideology, will enable maximal population well-being.⁹ This ideology is exemplified through the

7. Duménil and Lévy, “Neoliberal (Counter-)Revolution,” 9; Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, xi; Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Oksala, “Neoliberalism,” 53.

8. Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, ix-42.

9. Cotoi, “Neoliberalism: A Foucauldian Perspective”; Cannella and Koro-Ljungberg, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 155.

attack on the welfare state that corresponded with the rise of neoliberalism in the second half of the twentieth century.¹⁰ Of course, scholars critical of neoliberalism have articulated that rather than ensure maximal well-being, neoliberal processes only serve to expand the capital accumulation of the wealthy at the expense of the realization of equity and social justice along lines of race, class, gender, sexuality, and ability.¹¹ In fact, it is argued that inequality is an “inherent and necessary feature” of neoliberalism that serves as a regulating mechanism of the economy in place of state intervention, creating a reality in which corporate profit takes precedence over communities and social justice.¹²

Further exploring the relationship between neoliberalism and inequality, Lisa Duggan writes that the rise of neoliberalism has been contingent on the expansion of inequalities through the divestment in communities and the upward redistribution of wealth.¹³ She articulates several key phases in the construction and expansion on neoliberalism, two of which include the “attacks” on social movements of the 1960s and 1970s that aimed to redistribute wealth downward, including the Civil Rights, Black Power, feminist, and gay and lesbian liberation movements, as well as the twenty-first century emergence of a “‘multicultural,’ neoliberal ‘equality politics,’” which she describes as “a stripped-down nonredistributive form of “equality” designed for global

10. Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, xi; Duménil and Lévy, “Neoliberal (Counter-) Revolution,” 10.

11. Cotoi, “Neoliberalism: A Foucauldian Perspective”; Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*; Oksala, “Neoliberalism,” 55; Venn, “Neoliberal Political Economy,” 207-211.

12. Venn, “Neoliberal Political Economy,” 213; Giroux, “Spectacles of Race,” 191.

13. Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, x.

consumption” and which is “compatible with continued upward redistribution of resources.”¹⁴ For example, Duggan identifies the neoliberal construction of a “new homonormativity,” which she says refers to the ways in which gay liberation gets co-opted by neoliberalism to produce:

a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them, while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.¹⁵

In addition to attacking and commodifying movements for social justice, neoliberalism also creates a landscape conducive to the privatization of inequality. For example, under neoliberalism, racism is perceived through the “colorblind and seductive rhetoric of free enterprise, free markets, and common sense”, which “render[s] an enormous and growing racial inequality culturally palatable” through its erasure of the ever present structural reality of racism by framing it in terms of individual choice.¹⁶ In these ways and more, neoliberalism expands inequalities while co-opting and erasing from neoliberal consciousness its violent impacts on marginalized groups.

The aforementioned interrelation of neoliberalism and structural inequality brings attention to the ways in which, despite its emphasis on the market/state relationship, neoliberalism should not be understood solely as a political economic system or viewed

14. Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, xii.

15. Duggan, 50.

16. Giroux, “Spectacles of Race,” 191; Mascarenhas, “Where the Waters Divide,” 6.

only at the level of the state. Many scholars have articulated the ways in which neoliberalism characterizes not only an economic process, but also a normative social/economic/political rationality – even hegemony – that restructures and reconstructs a broad range of relationships and subjectivities at the levels of the citizen, the state, the market, and society as well as at the transnational level.¹⁷ Neoliberalism insidiously produces a particular economic subjectivity, commonly referred to as ‘*homo economicus*’, which is characterized by a normalized hyperindividualism, competitiveness, focus on productivity, self-interest and entrepreneurialism.¹⁸ This entrepreneurial subject is imagined and produced to make “rational” decisions based on economically-motivated valuations of loss and gain in all areas of social, political and economic life, the differentiation between which is blurred, while “continuously refashioning [themselves] through various forms of personal investments and insurances.”¹⁹ In constructing and maintaining this subjectivity and “regime of truth”, as well as the co-optation of all forms of knowledge and being, neoliberalism serves as a tool of omnipresent governmentality ensuring that its own competitive interests are facilitated,

17. Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*; Harvey, *Brief History of Neoliberalism*; Oksala, “Neoliberalism”; Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*.

18. Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 155-156; Oksala, “Neoliberalism,” 66; Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*.

19. Besley and Peters, *Subjectivity and Truth*, 165; Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 155-156; Cotoi, “Neoliberalism: A Foucauldian Perspective,” 113; Oksala, “Neoliberalism,” 66.

protected, maintained and positioned, unconsciously and consciously, as rational and natural.²⁰

The aforementioned ‘governmentality,’ coined by Michel Foucault, describes a “govern[ing] without govern[ing].”²¹ It is a form of omnipresent power imposed both from within and outside of the state, from within and outside of the self. It entails the governing of people “by and through their own interests” in a way that requires the “intimate modification of knowledge, government and subjectivities,” a process referenced previously in relation to the production of *homo economicus*.²² Many scholars apply Foucault’s theory of governmentality to their discussions of neoliberalism, often using the language of “neoliberal governmentality,” in an effort to articulate the ways in which neoliberalism has become hegemonic and constitutive of a new economic subjectivity, transforming and reconstructing every aspect of life and being.²³ Building on this foundation, I now turn to an exploration of the literature on neoliberalism in higher education, or the rise of the “neoliberal university.”

The Neoliberal University

The neoliberalization of the university, or the rise of “academic capitalism,” has been cited as emerging in the late 1970s, alongside the broader expansion of

20. Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 155-156.

21. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*; Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 155.

22. Cotoi, “Neoliberalism: A Foucauldian Perspective,” 113.

23. Wallenstein, “Introduction,” 30.

neoliberalism itself.²⁴ It is important to note here that, likely as a result of neoliberal governmentality in which governing occurs multi-directionally from within and outside of the state and the self, higher education's adoption of neoliberalism was not entirely imposed by external forces, like the withdrawal of government funding, but was also largely self-directed from within higher education institutions themselves as a result of the internalization of neoliberal values.²⁵ Regardless, this transformation of higher education has led the neoliberal university to mirror the same values of competition, individualism and privatization as those of the larger neoliberal political economy.

In the twenty-first century, higher education is increasingly characterized by the commercialization and commodification of research and educational processes; the rise of the phenomenon of students as consumers; the managerialization and corporatization of accountability structures; the segmentation of departments and academic disciplines; the presence of expanding structural inequities between varying faculty and staff classifications as well as along lines of class, race, gender, ability, and immigration status; the rise of forced micro-entrepreneurialism; and shifts in funding away from the arts and humanities toward the applied sciences, which are deemed to have more market relevance.²⁶ Put simply, under neoliberalism, the university has largely become "just another business with a bottom line," prioritizing revenue generation over all else.²⁷

24. Slaughter and Leslie, *Academic Capitalism*; Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 14.

25. Cotoi, "Neoliberalism: A Foucauldian Perspective," 113; Kandiko, "Neoliberalism in Higher Education," 154; Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 14.

As part of the maintenance of the aforementioned bottom line, the corporatized neoliberal university has leveraged an over-reliance on precariously positioned contingent workers, like adjunct faculty, graduate assistants and other non-tenure track faculty.²⁸ These positions are often misclassified, do not provide adequate (or even livable) compensation for the skill-level and hours required of the work, and lack both benefits and reliable career advancement opportunities.²⁹ Adrianna Kezar and colleagues emphasize that the insecurity inflicted on these contingent workers is a neoliberal tactic of workforce regulation. This insecurity is coupled with increasing levels of auditing and surveillance, also individualistic features of neoliberalism, which ensure the enhancement of competitiveness and productivity in the market.³⁰ Additionally, it must be noted that in order to ensure the steady availability of cheap labor (like that of many contingent workers), the neoliberal university continually produces a surplus of labor through its own programs with no guarantee that the workers it produces will be absorbed into the

26. Kandiko, "Neoliberalism in Higher Education," 157; Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 17; Saunders, "Neoliberalism in Higher Education," 4.

27. Torres and Rhoades, "Introduction," 32; Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, "Neoliberalism in Higher Education," 159.

28. Kandiko, "Neoliberalism in Higher Education," 158.

29. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 15.

30. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, 16; Ball, "Performativity, Commodification," 18.

market.³¹ Put bluntly, “human capital waste is built into the production process as a function of neoliberal governance.”³²

At the same time as higher education is expanding the availability of and reliance on a cheap labor force, it is raising the prices of tuition while undergoing marketable rebranding in an attempt to attract more student consumers of an educational product and thus raise more revenue.³³ The enhanced competitive positioning offered by a post-secondary education degree is sold to students as a central component of individual wealth generation, buying directly into neoliberal values of individualism and competition in the market.³⁴ Ironically, the enhanced revenue generation, brought in through the aforementioned processes of cheap labor production, rising tuition and marketing/rebranding, is being funneled into non-instructional initiatives that are targeted at enhancing universities’ positionings compared to other higher education institutions and so too center around enhancing the attractiveness to students as consumers in a competitive market.³⁵ Joyce Canaan and Wesley Shumar highlight that this ongoing commodification of higher education is exemplary of a broader process of privatization

31. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 26.

32. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, 26.

33. Canaan and Shumar, ““Higher Education,” 10; Saunders, “The Impact of Neoliberalism,” 2-3.

34. Saunders, “The Impact of Neoliberalism,” 2; Canaan and Shumar, ““Higher Education,” 17.

35. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 34.

of formerly public institutions, which mirrors the aforementioned shift away from the welfare state toward a privatized market state.³⁶

As previously alluded to, scholarship on the neoliberal university suggests that the neoliberal restructuring of higher education is having a negative impact on many students, faculty and staff.³⁷ Again, the neoliberalization of higher education produces poor working conditions for contingent workers that include low wages, misclassified working hours (leading to significant unpaid overtime), a lack of benefits, and a lack of job security. Due to corporatized management structures and a surplus of potential labor, these contingent workers have minimal influence over their poor working conditions.³⁸ This leaves many workers feeling low levels of morale, job satisfaction, respect and visibility, and more alienation, exploitation and marginalization at the campus workplace.³⁹ Particularly for graduate student workers, these working conditions have been linked to an increased likelihood of experiencing mental health challenges. Graduate students doing contingent work were six times more likely than other populations to experience anxiety and depression, with a disproportionate impact on women, students of color and low-income students.⁴⁰

36. Canaan and Shumar, “Higher Education,” 4.

37. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*.

38. Canaan and Shumar, “Higher Education,” 10; Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 16, 26, 36; Kandiko, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 157.

39. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 36, 65.

40. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, 65.

In addition to the perpetual overload of work responsibilities, alongside the many other toxic working conditions outlined in this section, many of these negative impacts are at least in part associated with heightened structural discrimination experienced by contingent workers at the neoliberal university. Student, faculty and staff experiences of inequity and discrimination at higher education institutions are well documented, but it is important to highlight here the ways in which these inequities are reinforced by and masked within the neoliberalization of the university.⁴¹ As previously explored, the neoliberal demand of market competition, the ever-totalizing commodification of university parts and functions, and the creation of students as consumers is enforced and supported by the expansion of assessment and surveillance mechanisms. This is clearly demonstrated in the conduct of and reliance on student evaluations in contingent faculty hiring practices.⁴² It is well documented that student evaluations are often not based on instructional quality but are rather determined based on racist, sexist, and politics-based biases (among other biases like ableism, heterosexism, and xenophobia) that disproportionately impact women and instructors of color.⁴³ This is exacerbated by neoliberal socialization of students as consumers who may assess teaching from the market standpoint of a customer rather than a learner.⁴⁴ Despite evidence of this

41. Guzman et al., “Microaggressions”; Jung, “Chronic Illness”; Price, *Mad at School*; Nicolazzo, *Trans* in College*.

42. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 31.

43. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, 32; Yamanaka, “Phenomenological Exploration.”

44. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, 31-32; Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 157.

phenomena, Gaile Cannella and Mirka Coro-Ljungberg articulate that under contemporary neoliberalism, these oppressive impacts are reinforced while simultaneously being masked and presented as having been solved.⁴⁵ In fact, these same oppressive neoliberal forces may also co-opt the experiences of those oppressed and marginalized within these systems “in the name of enterprise and competition.”⁴⁶

In addition to these structural oppressions, the neoliberal turn in higher education has had a negative impact on student success. In fact, the understanding of student success has transformed to refer to students’ abilities to conform to neoliberal society and compete in the market, a goal which is exclusionary along normative lines of race, gender, class, sexuality and ability.⁴⁷ Additionally, success is determined by students’ internalization of neoliberal values during their post-secondary education.⁴⁸ If, through their education, students are developing deep understandings of themselves and the world – for its intrinsic value and for a common societal good – it is in spite of the neoliberalization of higher education. The growing individualism, overburden of work responsibilities, demands of hyperproductivity and, in some cases, shifts to online education have eroded learning communities on college campuses, impacting students’ educational experiences in and outside of the classroom and also their motivation to

45. Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 157.

46. Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, 157.

47. Violette, “Other Possible Worlds,” 144-145.

48. Violette, 147.

learn.⁴⁹ Ultimately, the internalization of and all-but-forced compliance with neoliberal values through processes of neoliberal governmentality in higher education negatively impacts student, faculty and staff well-being, a theme I explore more deeply in the following sections.

Corporate Well-Being at the Neoliberal University

The literature explored thus far has highlighted the corporate restructuring higher education has undergone as a result of expanding neoliberal hegemony, leaving many universities to mirror bottom line-oriented businesses.⁵⁰ This, alongside the reality that for-profit universities are sites that influence and are influenced by a range of differently positioned populations (students, faculty and staff of varying positionalities and classifications), means that in addressing scholarship on higher education well-being interventions, it is necessary to review a combination of relevant literature on the enhancement of workplace well-being for employees as well as literature centered around enhancing well-being for students, including overlapping scholarship focused on higher education as a whole. As previously mentioned, it is important to highlight that much of this literature is not sufficiently critical, so my initial critique, and that of other scholarship on the neoliberal university, is integrated later in this and the following sections.

Currently, there is minimal scholarship that seeks to address the overarching trends in higher education well-being initiatives across the United States, however, it is

49. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 76-96.

50. Torres and Rhoades, "Introduction," 32.

evident that such initiatives have proliferated over recent decades.⁵¹ In fact, the presence of workplace well-being initiatives has steadily expanded since the 1970s, a trend that has paralleled the expansion of neoliberalism into more and more social/political/economic domains.⁵² As of 2017, eighty-nine percent of higher education institutions in the United States had implemented at least one well-being program, a number that will likely continue to grow.⁵³

So far, the minimal scholarship on university well-being initiatives highlights that such initiatives fall into three categories: those that are student-oriented, those that are faculty/staff-oriented, and those that are a hybrid of the two.⁵⁴ Additionally, while no universal definition of ‘well-being’ is used by higher education institutions, many universities focus their initiatives around some combination of the following dimensions of well-being: physical, intellectual, emotional, social, spiritual, and financial, addressing these themes through a variety of individual-, group-, and institutional-level interventions.⁵⁵

51. Travia et al., “Framing Well-Being,” 3; Watts, “A New Model,” under “A Shared Responsibility.”

52. Watts, “A New Model,” under “A Shared Responsibility.”

53. Watts.

54. Travia et al., “Framing Well-Being,” 4.

55. Travia et al., 2; Day and Penney, “Essential Elements,” 316-319; Reavley and Jorm, “Prevention and Early Intervention,” 132-139.

Enhancing Employee Well-Being

Most of the scholarship on corporate employee well-being initiatives is not focused specifically in the higher education field, however, as previously articulated, there is much overlap between higher education and other businesses since for-profit universities have taken on increasingly corporatized structures as a result of the expansion of neoliberalism. Scholars have documented a shift in employers' relationships to employee well-being as well as employees' expectations of employers in regard to their implementation of well-being initiatives.⁵⁶ While not all employers have embraced or engaged in this corporate co-optation of well-being, as more scholarship links well-being programs to neoliberal outcomes like increased productivity, heightened work performance, decreased absenteeism, lessened health-care expenses, and reduced employee turnover, many more corporate employers have chosen to adopt institutional well-being programs.⁵⁷ The calculated revenue losses associated with languishing employee well-being is likely a strong motivator for employers to invest in some form of programming targeted at enhancing employee well-being.⁵⁸

Corporate employee well-being initiatives take on various forms, largely oriented around individual, group, leader, and organizational focuses.⁵⁹ Many corporate programs adopt wellness coaching approaches, focus on the implementation of stress-management

56. Leiter and Cooper, "State of the Art," 1.

57. Leiter and Cooper, 1-2; Day and Penney, "Essential Elements," 315; Purser, "Critical Perspectives," 105-106.

58. Day and Penney, "Essential Elements," 315.

59. Day and Penney, 316-319.

techniques, initiate physical exercise programs, or take on broader institutional/environmental restructuring plans.⁶⁰ Regardless of the specifics of the approach, it is well-documented that these corporate well-being initiatives largely involve efforts to shift individual behavior to enhance coping skills, resilience, and “healthy” lifestyles. Some organizations may embrace a larger responsibility for creating healthier work environments and providing more employee resources.⁶¹ It must be noted, however, that these interventions are carefully calculated by employers to ensure their value on investment, which is closely connected with the aforementioned neoliberal imperatives of productivity and competitive positioning.⁶² Additionally, these well-being interventions become points of marketing which also ensure a return on investment, a clear commodification of employee well-being.⁶³ I further explore the neoliberal co-option and commodification of well-being, particularly as it pertains to mental health, later in this literature review.

Within higher education, these well-being initiatives have proliferated alongside the previously articulated negative impacts of neoliberalism on contingent workers.⁶⁴ To reiterate, the neoliberalization of higher education produces poor working conditions, lack of benefits, low job security and heightened levels of inequality over which

60. Leiter and Cooper, “State of the Art,” 1-6.

61. Day and Penney, “Essential Elements,” 318.

62. Travia et al., “Framing Well-Being,” 4.

63. Leiter and Cooper, “State of the Art,” 3.

64. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 36, 65.

contingent workers have minimal control.⁶⁵ These conditions have been linked to negative well-being impacts such as low job satisfaction and morale as well as feelings of anxiety, depression, invisibility, alienation, exploitation, and marginalization.⁶⁶ The aforementioned well-being initiatives, however, are not focused on dismantling these oppressive neoliberal conditions.

Enhancing Student Well-Being

A number of scholars have identified students' mental health and well-being as a critical focal point for universities.⁶⁷ This is due to the fact that university students have been identified as "very high risk populations" in terms of mental health and psychological distress, a reality that is increasing in severity over time.⁶⁸ Similar to higher education contingent workers who are negatively impacted by the neoliberalization of the university, students may also be negatively impacted by the university during their years of study.⁶⁹ Again, mirroring the data on contingent faculty, this is especially true for women, low-income, LGBTQ+ and students of color.⁷⁰

65. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 36-75.

66. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, 36, 65.

67. Baik, Larcombe and Brooker, "How Universities Can Enhance," 674; Reavley and Jorm, "Prevention and Early Intervention"; Travia et al., "Framing Well-Being."

68. Baik, Larcombe and Brooker, 674; Baldwin et al., "College Student Wellness," 1; Reavley and Jorm, 133.

69. Baik, Larcombe and Brooker, "How Universities Can Enhance," 675.

70. Baik, Larcombe and Brooker, 675.

Initiatives targeted at enhancing student well-being share many similarities with those targeted at workers. These interventions span both individual- and population-level strategies and largely focus on encouraging students to modify their behavior through the education of stress-management techniques and self-regulatory skills or involve the modification of campus environments, like the improvement of student relaxation spaces.⁷¹ Some scholars suggest that universities should focus more attention on the implementation of more programs oriented around self-help.⁷² These programs include “cognitive-behavioral e-health interventions” as well as relaxation and exercise interventions.⁷³

Most of the aforementioned higher education well-being approaches, which have proliferated over recent decades, focus on the adjustment of individuals’ and populations’ ways of being, thinking and living in order to enhance well-being. In doing so, these initiatives shift responsibility onto individuals to “take control” of their well-being. While there is some recognition within higher education well-being scholarship of the ways in which oppressive systems impact well-being, the scholarship is largely uncritical of the role neoliberalism plays in the creation of an environment not conducive to well-being and of the way in which the neoliberal university may profit off of its well-being initiatives in appropriative ways.⁷⁴ In the following section, I review the literature on the

71. Baik, Larcombe and Brooker, “How Universities Can Enhance,” 677, 682; Reavley and Jorm, “Prevention and Early Intervention,” 139.

72. Reavley and Jorm, 139.

73. Reavley and Jorm, 139.

neoliberal co-optation of mental health in an attempt to connect it to the processes taking place in higher education.

Neoliberal Co-Option and Commodification of Mental Health

As previously mentioned, the prevalence of mental health “disorders” in the United States has been increasing over recent decades.⁷⁵ Many scholars argue that this trend is inextricably linked with the expansion of neoliberalism, which plays an important role in the production and social construction of the mentally ill subject and in the creation of conditions not conducive for “positive” mental health, as well as in the commodification of mental health itself.⁷⁶

Under neoliberalism, conceptions of social, psychological and emotional “normalcy” are reified through the same values system that equates notions of success, happiness and personal fulfillment with individualistic objectives of material wealth, social gain and “coming out on top” competitively.⁷⁷ Normalcy is thus determined based on one’s ability to compete in the market and perform the neoliberal values of independence, personal responsibility and continual productivity. The thoughts and behaviors of those who do not conform to these standards are subsequently

74. Travia et al., “Framing Well-Being,” 2, 12-13.

75. Brown and Baker, *Responsible Citizens*, 70; Esposito and Perez, “Neoliberalism and Commodification,” 415.

76. Brayton, “‘Madness’ of Market Logic,” 67; Cosgrove and Karter, “Poison in the Cure,” 671; Esposito and Perez, “Neoliberalism and Commodification,” 415-417, 426-429; Moncrieff, “Ideas about Mental Health”; Teghsoonian, “Depression and Mental Health,” 31.

77. Esposito and Perez, “Neoliberalism and Commodification,” 416.

pathologized.⁷⁸ Many scholars argue that, despite a lack of recognition in mainstream discussions of mental health, neoliberalism – and the structural violence it inflicts – likely has an impact on mental health and creates the conditions for mental illnesses, like anxiety and depression, to proliferate.⁷⁹ Luigi Esposito and Fernando Perez write that these mental health conditions can be viewed as “by-products of a market society, where the emphasis on profit/personal gain and competition erodes social bonds and promotes alienation.”⁸⁰ Additionally, the economic and social conditions of neoliberalism, like the erosion of livable wages, the minimization of work benefits, the dismantling of social programs, and the expansion of inequalities, likely contribute to heightened levels of stress, depression, social anxiety, unhappiness, and financial insecurity.⁸¹

Furthering these connections between mental health and neoliberalism, Sean Brayton writes that the construction of mental illness and subsequent pathologization of those who do not conform to neoliberal understandings of normalcy “[offer] a way of treating social problems of economic inequality and exploitation as individual shortcomings.”⁸² Rather than take the aforementioned systemic view, mainstream mental health discourses position mental illness – and related notions of “normalcy and/or

78. Esposito and Perez, “Neoliberalism and Commodification,” 415-418.

79. Esposito and Perez,” 426-429; Moncrieff, “Ideas about Mental Health”; Teghsoonian, “Depression and Mental Health,” 31.

80. Esposito and Perez, 416.

81. Esposito and Perez, 426-429.

82. Brayton, “‘Madness’ of Market Logic,” 68.

sanity”⁸³ – as individual issues to be resolved, or rather controlled and commodified, through particular market solutions (see the rise of the multi-billion dollar wellness industry or the increase in workplace well-being initiatives since the 1980s).⁸⁴ It is through the naturalization of this neoliberal reality that dominant understandings of normalcy and sanity are legitimized as “commodities to be bought, sold and profited from” and mental health services become “systems of surveillance of unruly bodies” and minds.⁸⁵

Through this neoliberal commodification of mental health and psychological “normalcy,” and the mental health products and services intended to produce these states of being, individuals are encouraged to modify their own thoughts and behaviors rather than confront oppressive neoliberal systems. This shifts the responsibility for mental health challenges onto individuals themselves and away from neoliberalism and the institutions that uphold its values.⁸⁶ Additionally, in the workplace, mental health designations serve to depoliticize employment relations by ignoring power disparities and instead lead workers to problematizing themselves rather than their employers.⁸⁷ This reality can be further connected to the rise of corporate well-being initiatives.

83. Esposito and Perez, “Neoliberalism and Commodification,” 417.

84. Esposito and Perez, 427; For a discussion of the wellness industry, see McCartney, “The Wellness Industry”; For reference to workplace well-being initiatives, see Watts, “A New Model.”

85. Esposito and Perez, 417; Cosgrove and Karter, “Poison in the Cure,” 617.

86. Moncrieff, “Ideas About Mental Health,” 13.

87. Cohen, *Psychiatric Hegemony*, 104.

As previously explored in the context of corporate well-being initiatives at higher education institutions, which largely center around “improving” students’ and employees’ mental health, these initiatives rely heavily on the encouragement of the modification and self-management of individuals’ thoughts and behaviors.⁸⁸ These strategies are intended to facilitate individuals’ integration and conformation into neoliberal society, replacing various well-being challenges with heightened personal productivity and increased “capacity to consume.”⁸⁹ Expanding on this theme, Bruce Cohen writes,

Laid thick with the values of neoliberalism, the discourse of “positive mental health” no longer focuses primarily on bringing the “insane” back to some state of normality but rather on the self-improvement of the individual. It is no longer enough to be “sane” or “normal”; one has to be constantly striving to be more positive and happier in life. This is a therapeutic quest which perfectly aligns with the neoliberal philosophy of personal responsibility and the need to constantly improve the self.⁹⁰

In fact, under neoliberalism, outcomes of individual “healing” and the enhancement of personal productivity may in fact be synonymous, “such that healing *is* the restoration of productivity.”⁹¹ This continual task of self-improvement thus becomes a characteristic of normality in an ableist sense and also a quality of the “good” neoliberal subject,

88. Teghsoonian, “Depression and Mental Health,” 31.

89. Esposito and Perez, “Neoliberalism and the Commodification,” 418.

90. Cohen, *Psychiatric Hegemony*, 86.

91. Brayton, “‘Madness’ of Market Logic,” 69.

exemplifying the interrelation of these two interlocking hegemonies: ableism and neoliberalism.⁹² Additionally, these processes of self-improvement, and the mental health and well-being initiatives that encourage them, also play into a deeper level of neoliberal socialization which, according to Katherine Teghtsoonian, “construct[s] good citizens who take responsibility for making choices that do not burden the health care system,” an admirable quality in a neoliberal society that disparages notions of welfarism and state responsibility.⁹³ In the following section, I explore the manifestations of this neoliberal ableism in higher education, particularly as it pertains to mental health, as elucidated in critical disability studies scholarship.

Critical Disability Studies, Mental Health and Higher Education

Mateo Pimentel and Rebecca Monteleone highlight the importance of taking a critical stance that acknowledges the deep interconnectedness of neoliberalism and ableism.⁹⁴ So far, I have explored relevant literature on neoliberalism and have begun to connect it with the construction, co-option and commodification of mental health. In this section, I further explore critical disability studies as a field of inquiry and highlight the insights critical disability studies scholars have presented in relation to the neoliberal university and psychological/mental health disabilities.

To start, one of critical disability studies’ leading scholars, Rosemary Garland-Thompson, articulates that “disability” describes four interrelated aspects: “it is a system

92. Brown and Baker, *Responsible Citizens*, 80; Pimentel and Monteleone, “Privileged Bodymind,” 67-71.

93. Teghtsoonian, “Depression and Mental Health,” 31.

94. Pimentel and Monteleone, “Privileged Bodymind,” 67-71.

for interpreting bodily variations”; “it is a relationship between bodies and their environments”; “it is a set of practices that produce both the able-bodied and the disabled”; and “it is a way of describing the inherent instability of the embodied self.”⁹⁵ Jung offers another perspective on disability, writing, “disability does not refer to bodily impairments and limitations” but rather that it is “the naming of the experience of oppression.”⁹⁶ These understandings of disability takes into account the ways in which systems of ableism and neoliberal governmentality construct reality in such a way as to produce and maintain normative and non-normative physical, mental and psychological ways of being, which have “disabling effects” on those who do not conform to the norm of ableist hegemony.⁹⁷ Through this ableist naturalization of particular ways of being, able-bodiedness and able-mindedness become compulsory.⁹⁸ Critical disability studies recognizes and is critical of this reality, taking the stance that “body-minds” – a term which highlights the ways in which bodies and minds are inextricable from each other yet are consistently positioned as distinct in ableist society⁹⁹ – are best understood through their differences and variations rather than how they deviate from or conform to

95. Garland-Thompson, “Reshaping, Re-thinking, Re-defining,” 1.

96. Jung, “Chronic Illness,” 266.

97. Garland-Thompson, “Reshaping, Re-thinking, Re-defining,” 2; Price, *Mad at School*, 4; For reference to “disabling effects” of society, see Jung, “Chronic Illness,” 266.

98. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 7.

99. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, xvi.

normative understandings of beingness and ability.¹⁰⁰ Additionally, some critical disability studies scholars emphasize that while it is important to recognize the connections between the construction of disability and systemic injustice, this must be done “while also holding on to the inherent value of disabled and chronically ill people.”¹⁰¹

Central to critical disability studies is the tension between the medical and social model of disability. The medical model of disability, as the name suggests, medicalizes and pathologizes individuals’ deviations from the norm, positioning these deviations as “problems” to be fixed, cured or overcome within individuals themselves.¹⁰² The social model, on the other hand, positions disability as the relationship between people and the systems, institutions and environments with which they interact.¹⁰³ This social model of disability, emerging out of disability rights activism of the 1970s and 1980s, turns attention to the ways in which institutions and attitudes create inaccessibility and contribute to ableist oppression, and the corresponding currently-abled privilege, that is deeply entrenched in society.¹⁰⁴

100. Price, *Mad at School*, 4.

101. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 62.

102. Price, 4-5; Clare, 8, 69-71; Nishida, “Neoliberal Academia,” 151.

103. Garland-Thompson, “Reshaping, Re-thinking, Re-defining,” 1; Price, *Mad at School*, 4-5.

104. Nishida, “Neoliberal Academia”, 150; Price, *Mad at School*, 4-5; Jung, “Chronic Illness,” 266-268.

Higher education is one site at which ableist hegemony is (re)produced and maintained.¹⁰⁵ In admissions, the classroom, the office, campus grounds and the academy as a whole, particular ways of being are privileged over others, while those who do not conform to the norm are erased, misrepresented, othered and continually sent the message that they do not belong in academic spaces.¹⁰⁶ These norms are largely determined by neoliberal and ableist values of productivity, competition and exclusivity. Students and faculty are expected to conform to standards of academic rigor that require them to engage in social scenarios in normative ways, produce work quickly and “coherently”, be in consistent attendance and participate in normative ways, and generally perform sanity and normalcy as defined by ableist society.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, people with disabilities in higher education, and in society in general, are expected to conform to and accept this ableist, neoliberal status quo without complaint, a reality that Andrea Nicki refers to as the “cultural demand of cheerfulness.”¹⁰⁸ This may have a particularly harmful impact on those with psychological/mental health disabilities, like depression, for whom the “pressure to be cheerful requires a full-fledged denial” of their ways of being.¹⁰⁹ Those who do not conform to these norms are subjected to hyper-surveillance by peers, instructors and/or administrators who look for signs of potentially violent behavior (an

105. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 3.

106. Dolmage; Jung, “Chronic Illness”; Price, *Mad at School*.

107. Price, *Mad at School*, 5-7, 111-140.

108. Nicki, “The Abused Mind,” 94.

109. Nicki, 94.

ableist characteristic assigned to those with mental disabilities) or to determine whether students with disabilities are “disabled enough” to deserve the academic accommodations they receive.¹¹⁰ This hyper-surveillance in higher education mirrors the policing and surveillance of people with disabilities in the rest of society.¹¹¹

Additionally, when students with psychological/mental health disabilities do not conform to ableist standards within the neoliberal university, they may be labeled as lazy, unmotivated, unproductive, low-achieving, uncompetitive, irrational, illogical and/or nonautonomous.¹¹² These are all characteristics that stand in contrast to the values of neoliberalism.¹¹³ In this way, disability is constructed and defined in neoliberal society as a “lack of productivity” or as the incapability of efficient and profitable work.¹¹⁴

Touching on the neoliberal commodification of labor and the ableism inherent within it, Alison Kafer writes, “we are all to be smoothly running engines, and disability renders us defective products.”¹¹⁵ Nishida expands on this connection between neoliberalism, disability and higher education, articulating that productivity is understood “within a framework of individual capability, ability and competency” so that those operating

110. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 30; Price, *Mad at School*, 143-145; For analysis of “disabled enough” language, see Jung, “Chronic Illness,” 278-280.

111. Saltes, “‘Abnormal’ Bodies,” 55-70.

112. Jung, “Chronic Illness,” 264-282; Nishida, “Neoliberal Academia,” 150; Price, *Mad at School*, 72.

113. Nishida, “Neoliberal Academia,” 145-156.

114. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 54; Pimentel and Monteleone, “Privileged Bodyminds,” 71.

115. Kafer, 54.

within the neoliberal university come to internalize these ableist, neoliberal values and are expected to resolve any challenges to productivity (i.e., Disability) on their own.¹¹⁶

Additionally, it is important to highlight here the ways in which these ableist and neoliberal hegemonies influence and are influenced by neoliberal capitalism. As quoted by Erevelles and Minear, Erevelles writes,

the ‘ideology’ of disability is essential to the capitalist enterprise because it is able to regulate and control the unequal distribution of surplus through invoking biological difference as the ‘natural’ cause of all inequality, thereby successfully justifying the social and economic inequality that maintains social hierarchies...[D]isability...is [therefore] the organizing grounding principle in the construction of the categories of gender, race, class, and sexual orientation.¹¹⁷

In acknowledging the interrelation between these interlocking systems of oppression, we can better understand how ableism may be experienced differently along lines of gender and race as they intersect with disability. As Jay Dolmage writes, “ableism is never alone with itself,” such that “ableism on college campuses is deeply racialized, as racist attitudes and practices are also ableist.”¹¹⁸ Erevelles and Minear articulate that much of the language of ableism, including that of mental illness and discriminatory notions of “feeble mindedness”, is deeply rooted in colonial legacies of racism.¹¹⁹ These intersecting

116. Nishida, “Neoliberal Academia,” 150.

117. Erevelles, “Disability and the Dialectics,” 526; Erevelles and Minear, “Unspeakable Offenses,” 133.

118. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 38.

systems of oppression – sexism, racism and ableism – manifest in various ways. For instance, white men with mental disabilities are more likely to be welcomed in the academy than women faculty and scholars of color with disabilities.¹²⁰ Additionally, students of color with disabilities are routinely neglected, criminalized, othered and subjected to various forms of institutional violence within the education system. They are also far too commonly ascribed characteristics of violence and hypersexuality entirely rooted in the sexist, racist and ableist ideologies that are constructed and perpetuated in and through each other in the education system.¹²¹

The preceding literature connected the scholarship on neoliberalism, the neoliberal university and the neoliberal co-option of mental health with critical disability studies scholarship centered around students with psychological/mental health disabilities' experiences of ableism in higher education and society more broadly. Through the connection of these key areas of focus within the literature, I have laid the foundation for my own theoretical critique, which integrates the insights from the scholars referenced here. In the following section, I present an overview of the research methodology I used to collect and analyze data from the well-being initiatives of sixty-one higher education institutions.

119. Erevelles and Minear, “Unspeakable Offenses,” 133.

120. Price, *Mad at School*, 2.

121. Erevelles and Minear, “Unspeakable Offenses,” 127-133.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODS

The purpose of this study is to critically engage with themes of neoliberalism and ableism in higher education well-being initiatives, considering the covert and overt ways these hegemonies may influence and be influenced by these initiatives. In order to critically analyze these themes, I engage a multi-method, qualitative approach that combines both content analysis and critical discourse analysis (CDA), drawing on texts published by higher education institutions' well-being offices, programs and initiatives. Through the critical analysis of the discourses within these texts, I elucidate the evident connections between the aforementioned themes: neoliberalism, ableism, mental health, mental/psychological disability and well-being in higher education.

My research design involved an initial content analysis in which I collected and coded textual data from U.S. higher education institutions' well-being offices', programs' and initiatives' publicly available web pages. "Texts" may be interpreted broadly, though I primarily drew on web pages, blog posts and other written and visual materials published by the aforementioned institutions.¹²² As per Lisa Given, the purpose of this initial content analysis was to identify any patterns and relationships in published texts, particularly as they connected to the previously reviewed scholarship on neoliberalism,

122. Davis, "Investigating Cultural Producers," 57; Given, "Content Analysis," 121.

the neoliberal university, well-being and critical disability studies.¹²³ Though I did not have a specific quantity of data in need of coding – Given articulates that there are no rules surrounding data quantity¹²⁴ – I ultimately drew on sixty higher education institutions after collecting and coding the data until saturation. Similarly to Ryan Travia and colleagues, I drew on a combination of public research universities, private universities and colleges, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), historically white colleges and universities, tribal colleges and universities (TCUs) and women’s colleges.¹²⁵ These higher education institutions were selected based on the presence of an active well-being office, initiative or program and the availability of sufficient virtual materials published by the institutions themselves. A full list of institutions included in my data collection and analysis, including details about institution classifications, are available in Appendix A.

In reviewing for matches to this criteria, I used Google’s search engine as a primary means to identify individual institutions for analysis. Through the input of search terms such as “higher education well-being initiative,” “women’s college well-being initiative,” “HBCU well-being initiative” and “tribal college well-being initiative,” I selected all institutions from the first five pages of each subset of search results that met the aforementioned requirements. This method was less effective for HBCUs and TCUs, because significantly fewer of these institutions met the outlined criteria, so I also drew

123. Given, “Content Analysis,” 121.

124. Given, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” 146-148.

125. Travia et al., “Framing Well-Being,” 5.

institutions at random from the U.S. News and World Report's 2021 list of top Historically Black Colleges and Universities as well as the U.S. Department of Education's list of tribal colleges and universities offered by its "White House Initiative on American Indian and Alaska Native Education."¹²⁶ For the purpose of further discussion and analysis of nuances between institution types, some HBCUs and TCUs that did not meet my outlined criteria were necessarily included in my data collection.

For my initial content analysis, I engaged an inductive, directed analysis of content. Zhang and Barbara identify that through this methodology, coding "starts with a theory or relevant research finding" (in this case, my dual analytical lenses: critical disability studies and anti-neoliberal critique) and then enables the researcher to "immerse themselves in the data and allow themes to emerge."¹²⁷ This involved an initial coding for data that could be attributed to the guiding categories of neoliberalism and ableism. Then, I engaged in a secondary round of focused coding in which additional sub-codes were identified.¹²⁸ At this stage, analytic memos were written as a reflective and analytic strategy that further influenced my subsequent critical discourse analysis.¹²⁹

As previously mentioned, the purpose of my initial data coding and content analysis was to systematically identify dominant themes present on higher education institutions' well-being initiative web pages and connected textual sources. Once these

126. U.S. News and World Report, "Historically Black Colleges"; U.S. Department of Education, "Tribal Colleges and Universities."

127. Zhang and Wildemuth, "Qualitative Analysis of Content," 319.

128. Saldaña, *The Coding Manual*, 213-217.

129. Saldaña, 209.

themes were identified, I proceeded with a critical discourse analysis to further analyze discursive nuances present at the selected institutions. I reference Ellen Barton's definition of CDA here, as used by Margaret Price in her critical disability studies work, *Mad at School*:

Discourse analysis involves looking at texts, inductively identifying their rich features and salient patterns, and then using these features and patterns as examples in an argument in support of some generalization(s) or claim(s) about the meaning relations between features, texts, and their contexts.¹³⁰

My selection of "features and patterns," as well as my subsequent analysis, were filtered through the lenses of anti-neoliberal critique and critical disability studies. A cultural studies-informed CDA was selected as part of my research methodology for its close attention to textual discourse and the hegemonic structures and power relationships implicit within it.¹³¹ As Deborah Cameron and Ivan Panović articulate, discourse is not just about the language in use, but rather is a central way in which reality is both described and (re)constructed.¹³² Further reinforcing this point, Given writes that CDA studies enable researchers to "capture the interconnections among discourse, power, and social organization," which is part of the aim of my research.¹³³ Additionally, CDA was selected because of its acknowledgement of subjectivity and bias within research. Central

130. Barton, "Inductive Discourse Analysis," 23; Price, *Mad at School*, 30.

131. Barker and Galasinski, *Cultural Studies and Discourse*, 62-66; Given, "Critical Discourse Analysis," 146-148.

132. Cameron and Panović, "Critical Discourse Analysis," 66.

133. Given, "Critical Discourse Analysis," 146.

to CDA is a recognition that neutral analysis is a fallacy, and that critical and transparent reflexivity is essential to research of this kind.¹³⁴ Price notes that the “identification of the workings of governmentality through texts is not an end in itself, but rather a means to intervene in such practices to effect social change.”¹³⁵ As such, my intentions for this work is not politically neutral but rather oriented around a goal of social change.

Through a multi-method approach, my research explores the overarching research question: How do well-being initiatives reinforce neoliberal and ableist hegemonies within higher education? Additionally, my research explores related lines of inquiry, including: What are the neoliberal implications of institutional well-being discourses within higher education? Do institutional well-being discourses adequately and critically engage oppressive structural influences at the neoliberal university? How do ableism and neoliberalism interact within discourses of well-being at higher education institutions? How is disability, particularly psychological/mental health disability, co-opted and/or commodified by institutional well-being discourses at the neoliberal university? How is ableist hegemony implicitly and explicitly reinforced through institutional well-being discourse? What other normative power structures are entangled within well-being discourses at the neoliberal university?

My critical analysis is organized over the three following chapters. In chapter four, I begin my critique with an analysis of the ways in which higher education well-being initiatives are inherently organized around neoliberal ideology, considering how

134. Barker and Galasinski, *Cultural Studies and Discourse*, 146; Cameron and Panović, “Critical Discourse Analysis,” 66-67.

135. Price, *Mad at School*, 29.

this hegemony and economic politics manifests through well-being discourse in potentially harmful ways. In chapter five, I build on this foundational analysis of neoliberalism at the well-being university to consider the ways in which it interacts with ableism through well-being discourse. I draw on critical disability studies scholarship and other critical theories to offer an analysis of a cultural politics of well-being that serves to bolster normative neoliberal and ableist projects in higher education and beyond. In chapter six, I present an analysis of the nuances between various institutions' approaches to well-being, a discussion of neoliberal multiculturalism and a related, emergent trend of the co-optation of anti-racist liberation movements by the well-being university. Finally, I conclude with a consideration of a potential alternative to the discourse of well-being: a feminist ethics of care. Through the exploration of these themes, I hope to elucidate a more critical perspective on the current state of the well-being university as it pertains to neoliberalism and ableism; a perspective, I argue, that is lacking in the literature on the neoliberal university, on corporate well-being, and within the field of critical disability studies.

CHAPTER FOUR: NEOLIBERALISM, ECONOMIC POLITICS AND “FINANCIAL WELL-BEING”

Neoliberal hegemony is embedded in the fabric of higher education, manifesting across its institutions through their employment practices, funding decisions and marketing tactics as well as their ever-expanding privatization and corporatization.¹³⁶ It also manifests more subtly through higher education’s efforts to produce “good” neoliberal subjects ready to be absorbed into a global labor force.¹³⁷ I argue that these symptoms of neoliberalism, among others, are particularly pervasive in college and university well-being initiatives, which are under-acknowledged as locations where this hegemony is perpetuated and reproduced. Through a critical analysis of these initiatives, the nuances of neoliberalism’s insidious presence in higher education well-being discourse, and its impacts on students, faculty and staff, is made apparent.

In this chapter, I engage in a critical analysis of the well-being university, revealing the ways in which it not only conforms to the broad neoliberal impulse of higher education, but also perpetuates neoliberal ideology more subtly through the discourse of well-being itself.¹³⁸ Specifically, I argue that higher education well-being

136. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*; Kandiko, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 157.

137. Canaan and Shumar, “Higher Education,” 5.

initiatives demonstrate a clear corporatization of well-being through their various forms of marketing to student consumers and their forging of corporate partnerships around well-being services. Additionally, I argue that the well-being university perpetuates the ideology of neoliberalism through its reliance on the logic of individual responsibility, self-optimization and other interrelated values that serve neoliberal goals. Finally, using the well-being university's discussion of "financial well-being" as a site for analysis, I argue that through higher education's neoliberal well-being discourse, conditions of structural oppression and violence are obscured, perpetuating their harmful impacts on students, faculty and staff.

Corporate Higher Education and the Marketing of Well-Being

Since the 1970s, higher education has continued to undergo a dramatic restructuring as it further aligns itself with neoliberalism.¹³⁹ A central facet of this shift is the ongoing corporatization of colleges and universities that now operate as for-profit businesses, heavily marketing a number of educational commodities to student consumers.¹⁴⁰ This trend has corresponded with higher education institutions' investments of increasingly large portions of their budgets into non-instructional

138. I use the term "the well-being university" as a way of re-appropriating the language proposed by George Mason University when it proclaims its desire to be the "first well-being university." See George Mason University, "Well-Being University Initiative."

139. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 14.

140. Canaan and Shumar, "Higher Education," 6; Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, "Neoliberalism in Higher Education," 157.

endeavors intended to enhance their competitive positionings in the market.¹⁴¹ This is clearly visible in the growing presence of well-being initiatives on college and university campuses, which are organized and marketed to student consumers in highly effective ways, essentially selling them an enticing vision of well-being. For example, George Mason University’s Center for the Advancement of Well-Being advertises that its mission is “to catalyze human well-being by promoting the science and practices that lead to a life of vitality, purpose, resilience, and engagement.”¹⁴² Similarly, the Georgia Institute of Technology asserts that through its programming, it “prepares and equips [its] community members with the fundamental tools and life skills to thrive.”¹⁴³ Wake Forest University’s Office of Well-Being centers an advertisement for its aromatherapy services on its online home page, while Harvard University encourages its students to “schedule a massage or acupuncture appointment.”¹⁴⁴ Additionally, many higher education institutions brand and market themselves as national leaders in campus health and well-being, likely contrasting themselves and their missions against the national statistics of decreasing well-being among college students.¹⁴⁵ In fact, George Mason University goes as far as to assert its aim to become the “first well-being university,” effectively co-

141. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 34.

142. George Mason University, “About the Center.”

143. Georgia Institute of Technology, “Health and Wellbeing.”

144. Wake Forest University, “Home”; Harvard University, “About Us.”

145. Baldwin et al., “College Student Wellness,” 1; Reavley and Jorm, “Prevention and Early Intervention,” 133.

opting well-being into its corporate brand.¹⁴⁶ Using enticing language of thriving and flourishing, through the advertisement of services embedded in the multi-billion-dollar wellness industry, and the self-positioning as national leaders in well-being, higher education institutions are able to use their well-being initiatives to attract student consumers who are drawn to the vision of individual well-being that is sold to them.¹⁴⁷

In keeping with the neoliberal trend of the corporatization of higher education, many well-being initiatives have opted to forge partnerships with external wellness corporations. Particularly at public colleges and universities, where state funding continues to dwindle, this fits neatly into the neoliberal trend of public institutions turning over many of their functions and responsibilities to private entities.¹⁴⁸ Exemplifying this trend, the Wellbeing Program at the University of Minnesota advertises that its services “...will now be hosted through Virgin Pulse, an exciting new wellness platform that offers highly personalized activities, tips and tools that make it easy and fun to engage every day” and employees at the College of St. Scholastica are encouraged to “...enjoy free access to thousands of expert-led fitness, mindfulness, yoga, and healthy cooking videos with the ‘Netflix’ for health and wellness, Grokker.”¹⁴⁹ Additionally, many higher education institutions have opted to partner with the online resource CampusWell, which

146. George Mason University, “Well-Being University Initiative.”

147. McCartney, “The Wellness Industry.”

148. Kandiko, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 154; Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, 12.

149. University of Minnesota, “Be the Best You”; College of St. Scholastica, “Employee WellU.”

features a highly editorialized and marketable take on well-being. Using this resource, students are encouraged to “read articles about relevant health and wellness topics and learn how [they] can take action on reaching [their] full potential.”¹⁵⁰ Some schools, like Liberty University, also link annual health and wellness expos to their well-being initiatives, featuring “...on campus and off-campus vendors who reinforce our commitment to holistic wellness.”¹⁵¹ These approaches to well-being clearly serve a goal of enhancing corporate profit, which is evidenced in the marketing language employed by higher education institutions in reference to their corporate partnerships, and, in many cases, continue to further privatize functions of public higher education. Additionally, the aforementioned approaches to well-being serve to perpetuate neoliberal individualism, a theme which is explored more deeply in the following section.

Perpetuating Neoliberal Values at the Well-Being University: Individual Responsibility Discourse

In addition to the corporatization and privatization of higher education, neoliberalism manifests at the well-being university in pervasive discourses of individual responsibility, self-optimization, hyper-productivity, grit and self-assessment, all of which obscure oppressive structural conditions and obstacles to student, faculty and staff well-being, while perpetuating harmful neoliberal, ableist and classist ideologies. In beginning to unpack these interlocking discourses, it is necessary to recognize how they emerge out of a tedious neoliberal history in which responsibility and costs have steadily

150. College of St. Scholastica, “Student WellU.”

151. Liberty University, “Wellness Initiatives.”

been directed away from the state and onto households and individuals.¹⁵² In higher education well-being initiatives, the neoliberal expectation of individual responsibility shows up in both covert and overt ways. It is most conspicuous in well-being initiatives' assertions that "your wellbeing is, and will always be, your responsibility," that well-being "comes from within" and is "self-determined."¹⁵³

Still asserting the pervasive neoliberal value of individual responsibility, some well-being initiatives take a more libertarian approach. This is demonstrated by the University of Minnesota, which writes,

Wellbeing begins with the simple question—what can I do to feel safe, content, and balanced? Asking this shifts our whole perspective—we are no longer looking to our healthcare providers or government or big business to tell us what we need to do. We are empowering ourselves to explore what we really need and to evaluate for ourselves what makes sense."¹⁵⁴

While clearly susceptible to anti-neoliberal critique, the University of Minnesota's statement on well-being may have a potential connection to a disability justice perspective that should not be overlooked. Particularly, the assertion of an understanding of well-being that is distinct from the defining/diagnosing/treating proclivities of corporations and the state has a certain alignment with discussions of the politics of cure

152. Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, 14.

153. Wake Forest University, "Office of Wellbeing"; University of Minnesota, "What is Wellbeing?"; Hendrix College, "What is Well-Being?"

154. University of Minnesota, "What is Wellbeing?"

among disability justice scholars and activists – a theme which will be explored in greater depth in chapter two – though this example lacks a structurally transformative motivation central to disability justice.¹⁵⁵ Given, however, that well-being initiatives, like that at the University of Minnesota, are deeply embedded in cultures and institutions of neoliberalism and ableism, it is unlikely that critical disability justice was meaningfully taken into consideration when such assertions of individualism were articulated.

Many higher education institutions also demonstrate their compliance with the neoliberal value of individual responsibility in their commitments to “educate and empower” individuals so that they can “take charge” of their well-being.¹⁵⁶ Relatedly, this ideology of individual responsibility is present in the ways in which well-being initiatives frame well-being as a skill that needs to be “taught, developed, and practiced.”¹⁵⁷ It is posited that without this education and empowerment, students may not take appropriate action to enhance their well-being, which, in turn, could impact their abilities to succeed.¹⁵⁸ The connection of these ideas – self-empowerment, individual action, well-being and success – ultimately shifts responsibility for well-being and success onto individuals themselves, obscuring structural conditions that largely dictate

155. See Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*. Clare offers an extended analysis of the politics of cure from a critical disability studies/activist perspective.

156. See Wake Forest University, “Signs of Stress” and Vanderbilt University, “Strategic Planning Committee” for examples of “educate and empower language; See University of California, Berkeley, “Be Well Cal” and Howard University, “Wellness” for examples of “take charge” language.

157. Texas Woman’s University, “Health and Well-Being Initiative.”

158. See University of Texas at San Antonio, “Initiative Brief.”

those experiences, a reality that is reflected broadly in understandings of mental health and well-being under neoliberalism.¹⁵⁹

Stemming from their reliance on the neoliberal value of individual responsibility, many higher education well-being initiatives center much of their programming on the encouragement of individuals to modify their behavior and to optimize themselves. These demands – individual change and continual self-improvement – are characteristic of neoliberal governmentality, which produces conditions in which individuals must continually refashion and improve themselves in order to comply with the demands of neoliberalism.¹⁶⁰ This is demonstrated in many higher education institutions’ tendencies to frame well-being in terms of lifestyle in need of enhancement. Additionally, some institutions posit that well-being can be achieved through a simple adjustment of individuals’ attitudes, while others, like George Mason University, draw on the scholarship of neuroplasticity to encourage individuals to “change the chemistry of [their] brain[s] to produce more positive and hopeful responses,” an expectation that has both neoliberal and ableist connotations that will be further critiqued in chapter five.¹⁶¹ Through the engagement in these practices of self-modification, individuals are

159. Moncrieff, “Ideas about Mental Health,” 13-14.

160. See Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*; See also Cotoi, “Neoliberalism: A Foucauldian Perspective,” 113. Cotoi outlines the way in which governmentality implies a governing “by and through [individuals’] own interests”; See also Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 155-156 who describe how “neoliberalism creates an all-invasive governmentality that ‘governs without governing.’”

161. See University of Minnesota, “What is Stress?” and “Why It’s Important” for examples of a university recommending individual attitude adjustments for well-being; George Mason University, “Well-Being: An Overview.”

encouraged to “be the best you,” to “build your best self” and to “reach their fullest potential.”¹⁶² Regardless of the intentions of higher education well-being initiatives, this language of behavior change, self-modification and self-improvement serves to erase structural conditions and to place the onus of well-being onto individuals themselves, further contributing to the rearticulation of neoliberal values in more areas of higher education and in life.

In addition to perpetuating the neoliberal values of individual responsibility and self-optimization, much of the well-being discourse in higher education also contributes to and normalizes the neoliberal values of hyper-productivity and efficient work performance. Rather than challenging the demands of hyper-productivity faced by college students, Wake Forest University writes,

Nobody said college was easy. Particularly here. After all, our unofficial nickname is “Work Forest” [...] Nearly three of every four Demon Deacons in the Class of 2014 declared a second major and/or a minor or two. Hundreds of committed volunteers average 30 hours of community service per semester [...] If you’ve recently feared it was too much, relax for a moment. Your feelings are actually the norm for college students.¹⁶³

In this way, unrealistic academic and work performance expectations are normalized, the subtext being: *if you are unable to overcome the demands of neoliberal higher education,*

162. See the University of Minnesota, “Be the Best You” for “be the best you” rhetoric; see College of St. Scholastica, “Employee WellU” for “be the best you” rhetoric; see Dartmouth College, “Mission and Location,” for “reach your fullest potential” rhetoric.

163. Wake Forest University, “Occupational.”

you have yourself to blame, because everyone else is also overwhelmed, yet managing, nonetheless. This places the onus for academic “thriving” on individual students. A similar logic is also applied to employees, who are encouraged to manufacture work-life balance in such a way that erases the institutional conditions in higher education that are actively harmful to workers’ well-being and make “work-life balance” an ambitious goal, one which should be the structural responsibility of colleges and universities themselves, not of workers.¹⁶⁴

It is important to articulate as well that higher education well-being initiatives’ understandings of thriving – for students, faculty and staff – are also embedded within narratives of “grit” and overcoming adversity. Exemplifying this, the Georgia Institute of Technology writes,

Thriving is growing vigorously. It is when an individual is able to progress towards or realize a goal despite or because of their circumstances and hardships. Thriving students keep trying, persisting through challenges with a positive perspective and confidence that they can succeed through hard work.¹⁶⁵

This logic relies heavily on the myth of meritocracy, a crucial feature of neoliberalism, asserting that through their hard work, individuals can undoubtedly overcome challenges

164. See Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, for an extended analysis of the impact of the neoliberalization of higher education on university workers. The authors address the ways in which the neoliberal university demands high levels of productivity of its employees in precarious working conditions; See Vanderbilt University, “Vocational Resources” and Hendrix College, “Occupational Well-Being” for reference to finding “balance” in career.

165. Georgia Institute of Technology, “Thriving.”

– and structural barriers, which are erased from perception – to achieve success.¹⁶⁶ This is a theme that will be discussed in more detail in chapter two in the context of neoliberal discourses of “overcoming” that perpetuate ableism.

Further stemming from the aforementioned meritocratic neoliberal values, many higher education institutions frame the well-being practices they advertise as necessary actions individuals must take to overcome the challenges of neoliberal work and academic expectations. The University of Chicago posits that “self-care actually helps you make progress faster” and that “finding and implementing your own self-care routine is integral to reaching your life goals.”¹⁶⁷ Similarly, the University of Virginia Employee Well-Being Program advertises that “when you’re healthy, you have the energy and focus to do your best work and live your best life” and therefore encourages its employees to care for themselves by creating and maintaining “healthy lifestyle[s] to meet [their] personal well-being goals,” which are positioned as inextricably linked to personal and professional success.¹⁶⁸

In this way, self-care becomes what Michel Foucault might call a neoliberal “technology of the self” – that is, a “technology” which:

[...] permit[s] individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct,

166. See Littler, “Meritocracy as Plutocracy” for an extended analysis of the logic of meritocracy as it serves to uphold neoliberalism.

167. University of Chicago, “Self-Care.”

168. University of Virginia, “About Us.”

and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality.¹⁶⁹

In this case, self-care as a technology of the self is intended to enhance individuals' productivity, well-being and success. Additionally, self-care serves a broader system of neoliberalism here by placing the onus for care onto the individual, thus absolving the state from its responsibility for collective care as well as each of us from the responsibility of collective care for each other (a notion that is explored further in relation to feminist care ethics in chapters five and six).¹⁷⁰ These connections made between self-care, work performance and success point to the underlying neoliberal motivations of well-being initiatives implemented on for-profit college and university campuses, a trend which is mirrored throughout the corporate world.¹⁷¹

Further facilitating compliance with normative neoliberal values, many higher education institutions encourage various forms of self-assessment through their well-being initiatives. These types of self-assessment include online tools to identify mental illness, general well-being and "positivity ratio";¹⁷² biofeedback technologies to assess psychological and physiological experiences;¹⁷³ and general calls for faculty and staff to

169. Martin, Gutman and Hutton, "Technologies of the Self," 18.

170. Ward, "Caring for Ourselves?" 46.

171. Day and Penney, "Essential Elements," 315-317;

172. See College of St. Scholastica, "Student Center for Health" for mental health self-assessment; see University of Minnesota, "Wellbeing Assessment" for general well-being assessment; see University of Minnesota, "How Do Thoughts" for "positivity ratio" assessment.

“teach students how to self-assess accurately by modeling [their] own self-assessing behavior.”¹⁷⁴ The goals of these assessments are to help individuals “determine where [they] are in each aspect of wellbeing and point to areas where [they] might want to make changes” and to “learn to recognize these processes and exert more control over [their] bodily responses to stressful events.”¹⁷⁵ Ultimately, such calls to self-assessment encourage individuals to surveil and police themselves within the scope of what is determined to be normal and desirable under neoliberalism. Such techniques are broadly leveraged within neoliberal institutions to measure workers’ “conformity and involvement,” but, as evidenced by the well-being university, are applicable to students as well.¹⁷⁶ Additionally, it must be noted that discourses of body-mind “control” (i.e., “exert more control over [their] bodily responses”) are rooted in ableist perceptions of disability as a state of being “out-of-control,” also informed by normative expectations under neoliberalism.¹⁷⁷ It is clear through these normative discourses, which are explored in greater detail in chapter five, that the well-being university is responsible for both perpetuating and obscuring systems of oppression at a number of levels.

173. College of St. Scholastica, “Student WellU,” under “Emotional.”

174. University of Texas at Austin, “Texas Well-Being,” 11.

175. University of Minnesota, “Wellbeing Assessment”; College of St. Scholastica, “Student WellU,” under “Emotional.”

176. Foster, “Therapeutic Spirit of Neoliberalism,” 92.

177. See Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 7 for reference to ableist perception of the disabled subject as “out-of-control”; Pimental and Monteleone, “Privileged Bodymind,” 63-71.

In addition to overlooking broader systems of structural inequality, higher education well-being initiatives obscure institutional conditions within higher education that negatively impact student, faculty and staff well-being. This includes the expansion of poor working conditions, a lack of benefits, low job security, heightened levels of inequality and the dissolution of community, all of which have been linked to experiences of anxiety, depression, invisibility, alienation, exploitation, and marginalization.¹⁷⁸ Given the ways in which the neoliberalization of higher education has led to a dissolution of community connection, negatively impacting people at all levels of higher education, it is ironic – or perhaps more so hypocritical – that so many well-being initiatives place significant focus on enhancing “social well-being” at an individual level.¹⁷⁹ The well-being university recognizes that community connection and support “increase a sense of feeling valued, foster positive self-regard, and promote optimal development and adjustment,” but do not address how the neoliberalization of higher education makes these conditions continually more difficult to attain. Instead, they encourage students to develop their “ability to connect and relate to other individuals in the community,” once again shifting the responsibility of well-being onto individuals themselves.¹⁸⁰ This theme is further explored in the following section, in which I pay particular attention to notions of individual responsibility for “financial well-being” and the erasure of structural

178. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 36, 65.

179. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, 76-96; For examples of “social well-being,” see Mercy College, “Wellness Initiative”; University of Virginia, “Social Connectedness”; Cleveland State University, “Shine Well: Social Wellness.”

180. College of St. Scholastica, “Student WellU,” under “Social.”

conditions of classism and economic injustice as they manifest at the well-being university.

Classism, Economic Injustice and Manifesting Financial Well-Being

Many higher education institutions advertise “financial well-being” as a key dimension of well-being promoted in their programming.¹⁸¹ In these initiatives, financial well-being is addressed at the level of the individual and frequently relies on the same notions of individual responsibility explored throughout this chapter. In this way, the well-being university remains a site where neoliberal economic politics play out in ways that perpetuate classism and the erasure of structural economic injustice. I do not contest that financial and economic circumstances contribute significantly to well-being at individual, societal and global levels. However, the ways in which the well-being university seeks to address this theme are severely lacking at best and in total compliance with the structural violence of capitalism at worst. Therefore, it is critical to unpack the ways in which these systemic conditions manifest through the discourse of financial well-being – and also how financial well-being discourse is situated within systemic neoliberal conditions – in higher education well-being initiatives.

Financial well-being is an especially important topic of analysis at the well-being university due to the complex ways in which the neoliberalization of higher education creates conditions in which college degrees – specifically from fields closely aligned with

181. For examples of “financial well-being,” see: Cleveland State University, “Shine Well: Financial Wellness”; Georgia Institute of Technology, “Financial Well-Being”; Luther College, “Financial.”

the market¹⁸² – are sold as educational products necessary for upward economic mobility and simultaneously require students to amass ever-increasing amounts of student debt, taking on the costs of these institutions in place of the state.¹⁸³ Higher education well-being initiatives often recognize debt as part of students’ experiences of financial well-being, but, perhaps due to their being situated within the neoliberal university or the fact that structural change seems out of reach, the discourse they present consistently positions debt as a material issue to be addressed by individuals themselves.¹⁸⁴

Mirroring language used more broadly within the well-being university, students are encouraged to embrace a personal responsibility perspective by “taking control” of their financial well-being and “assert[ing] [their] own path towards financial security, peace of mind, and a more enjoyable lifestyle.”¹⁸⁵ In the service of this individual responsibility approach, financial well-being is framed as a set of practices and behaviors that students can implement or modify in their lives to achieve well-being. These largely include various takes on budgeting and saving.¹⁸⁶ However, some well-being institutions

182. Kandiko, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 157.

183. Canaan and Shumar, “Higher Education,” 13; Saunders, “The Impact of Neoliberalism,” 4.

184. See University of Minnesota, “Dealing with Debt Stress”; Harvard University, “Financial”; Wake Forest University, “Financial.”

185. See Georgia Institute of Technology, “Financial Well-Being” for example of “take control of your financial well-being” language; Cleveland State University, “Shine Well: Financial Wellness.”

186. For examples of budgeting/saving language in reference to “financial well-being,” see Luther College, “Financial”; University of Virginia, “Financial Stability”;

include more unconventional supplementary approaches, like encouraging students to address the negative impacts of debt and financial insecurity by making more friends (in order to “feel richer”) or adopting “abundance mindsets” (in order to stop “yearning for more”).¹⁸⁷ Connectedly, some well-being initiatives position financial well-being in the inverse. Rather than framing stress as resulting from financial hardship, they frame financial hardship as resulting from stress, which positions the achievement of emotional well-being as a solution to “financial issues.”¹⁸⁸ Additionally, financial stress is presented as problematic for neoliberal compliance since it might “[distract] from work and personal obligations.”¹⁸⁹ These approaches to financial well-being demonstrate how higher education well-being initiatives tend to center their programming around the accommodation of and coping with economic injustice, albeit in highly superficial ways, without any critical recognition or challenging of these unjust economic conditions themselves and while simultaneously maintaining a stance that the onus for well-being remains on the individual.

Many higher education well-being initiatives also perpetuate classism in their framing of well-being as individuals’ “ability” to manage their finances, rather than as their access to sufficient economic resources. This language of ability is often paired with

Harvard University, “Financial”; Cleveland State University, “Shine Well: Financial Wellness.”

187. See University of Minnesota, “Why Personal Relationships” for “feel richer” language; see University of Minnesota, “Dealing with Debt Stress” for “yearning for more” language.

188. Colorado State University, “Well-Being Initiatives.”

189. University of Virginia, “Financial Wellness.”

information about positive mindsets toward finances as well as student and credit card debt. For example, beneath its definition of financial well-being as one's "ability to manage what [they] have in a responsible manner," Wake Forest University's Office of Well-Being presents information on student debt and urges students to take charge of their financial well-being by planning their professional futures.¹⁹⁰ It then contrasts the positive statistics of its former graduates' employment rates with statistics about individuals' mismanagement of credit cards. Specifically, it connects students' risky credit card use with "high-risk health behaviors" like "drunken driving; use of amphetamines; functional impairment from depression; above-average body-mass index; lower grade-point averages; and unprotected sexual activity."¹⁹¹ The conflation of financial well-being, individual credit card use and "high-risk health behaviors" implies and perpetuates the classist, ableist, fatphobic notions that those who heavily rely on credit cards – a predatory financial system both enabled by and bolstering of neoliberalism¹⁹² – also embody a host of individually "undesirable" qualities like carelessness, laziness, mental illness, fatness and unintelligence.¹⁹³ These oppressive ideas reinforce the neoliberal narrative that individuals are and should be responsible for

190. Wake Forest University, "Financial."

191. Wake Forest University, "Financial."

192. Bowsher, "Credit/Dept and Human Capital."

193. For a discussion of the ways in which neoliberal understandings of dependency are construed through a cultural and economic politics of class, race and gender, see Cohen, "Punks, Bulldagger, and Welfare Queens," 457. This theme is discussed in greater depth in chapter 5, further integrating an analysis of the cultural politics of disability.

their own life circumstances. They also begin to nudge into a representation of the ways in which economic and cultural politics are heavily reliant on each other for the expansion and obscuring of neoliberalism itself.¹⁹⁴

Despite the seemingly positive and encouraging language used in the marketing of higher education well-being initiatives, a close reading and critical analysis reveals the problematic ways in which the well-being university perpetuates neoliberal hegemony. It is evident that higher education well-being initiatives have been adopted into strategies of corporatization, privatization and broader neoliberalization in higher education. They reify and perpetuate neoliberal hegemony at a micro level, demonstrating the insidious nature of the individual responsibility discourse now embedded in higher education and wellness trends more broadly. Simultaneously, the discourse of well-being seems to obscure its own complicity in the perpetuation of structural violence in higher education and neoliberal society, opting to overlook structural conditions in favor of a more marketable and easily saleable vision of well-being that is rooted in individual narratives of thriving, resilience and self-optimization. In the following chapter, I connect my discussion of neoliberal well-being discourse to a critical analysis of the ways in which the well-being university perpetuates ableist hegemony at a variety of levels, positioning it in the context of critical disability studies.

194. Fraser and Gordon, “Genealogy of Dependency”; Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISABILITY, ABLEISM AND THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF WELL-BEING

The well-being university is a microcosm of neoliberal society, the economic and cultural politics of which are on full display in well-being programs and discourse alike. Part of this politics, the pervasive responsabilization of individual students, faculty and staff, is enabled by an undercurrent of ableism that is both foundational to higher education and connected to disparaging discourses of dependency in society as a whole, themes I explore in greater depth in this chapter.¹⁹⁵ For this reason, it is important to center a critical disability studies analysis of ableism in the context of the neoliberal well-being university, especially considering the critical role that cultural politics – including that of disability – plays in the expansion of neoliberalism itself.¹⁹⁶

Building from this understanding, in this chapter, I conduct a critical analysis of the ways in which higher education well-being initiatives perpetuate an ableist hegemony that is deeply interrelated with neoliberalism.¹⁹⁷ I argue that this is demonstrated in the

195. See the discussion of individual responsibility in chapter 1; Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 3. Dolmage writes that disability has been central to the construction of a “lower education”, against which higher education positions itself as exceptional; Mladenov, “Postsocialist Disability Matrix,” 111.

196. Duggan, *The Twilight of Equality*, xiv. Duggan emphasizes that, due to the critical role that a shifting cultural politics has played in the expansion of neoliberalism, cultural and economic politics must not be addressed as distinct and unrelated domains of life; Goodley and Lawthorn, “Critical Disability Studies”, 263.

presence of what I refer to as the “neoliberal matrix of ability/success/well-being,” which describes the well-being university’s over-association and conflation of neoliberal performance, success, well-being and ability in ways that simultaneously valorize individual responsibility, obscure neoliberalism and further the normative project of ableism. Additionally, I argue that ableist and neoliberal hegemonies are present in the well-being university’s medicalization of mental/psychological disability, uncritical perpetuation of a pro-cure politics, othering of disability through the reliance on a variety of ableist tropes and ideologies, as well as a vilification and policing of disability.

The Neoliberal Matrix of Ability/Success/Well-Being

Pervasive in higher education well-being initiatives are the interlocking discourses of ability, success and well-being, which are uncritically positioned in relation to, and often as reliant on, individuals’ compliance with neoliberal values. As previously mentioned, this results in the valorization of individual responsibility, the obscuring of neoliberal hegemony and the insidious perpetuation of ableism. In beginning to unpack this finding, I first revisit the notions of self-optimization and behavior modification championed by many higher education well-being initiatives.¹⁹⁸ Through encouraging students, faculty and staff to engage with various technologies of the self, the well-being university reinforces the neoliberal ideology that individual well-being is inherently tied to neoliberal compliance (i.e., Productivity, responsibilization, and self-optimization for market competition and efficient job performance). This positioning is not always

197. Erevelles and Minear, “Unspeakable Offences,” 133, 142.

198. See chapter 4 for a discussion of self-optimization and behavior modification.

conspicuous, as many universities rely on a seemingly innocuous language of individual difference to encourage students, faculty and staff to identify understandings of well-being that are unique to them.¹⁹⁹ However, the same universities subsequently frame well-being in normative terms as an essential ingredient in the enhancement of individuals' productivity, thus revealing the neoliberal logic underpinning their initiatives.²⁰⁰

Demonstrating this, Texas Woman's University posits: "when we are well, we are more productive and can more easily find satisfaction in life";²⁰¹ the University of Minnesota writes, "reacting to chronic stress can impair your ability to succeed at your job" (attributing this to "emotional swings," "procrastination" and "inefficiency," among other causes);²⁰² while other institutions, like the College of St. Scholastica, make associations between "health, wellness, productivity, [and] motivation" without critically analyzing the relationship between these goals and the overarching neoliberal and ableist hegemonies that influence them.²⁰³ In these ways, the well-being university conflates well-being with productivity and the performance of the normative values of neoliberalism, starkly replicating the broader treatment of mental illness under late

199. For language of "unique" well-being, see College of St. Scholastica, "Employee WellU"; Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, "Rattler Wellness"; Wellesley College, "Student Wellness."

200. See chapter 4 for a discussion of the well-being university's framing of well-being in terms of neoliberal productivity enhancement.

201. Texas Woman's University, "Co-Curricular Framework."

202. University of Minnesota, "Why It's Important."

203. College of St. Scholastica, "Student WellU."

capitalism, which involves the positioning of healing (inextricably linked to the discourse of well-being, as I explore later in this chapter) as the “restoration of productivity.”²⁰⁴

Connected to this over-correlation between well-being and neoliberal performance, is the discussion of well-being as though it were a goal for which individuals must strive to achieve. Wake Forest University exemplifies this when it describes well-being as an “eight-dimensional balancing act” that must be “maintained properly” in order to “cope with adversity.”²⁰⁵ Similarly, Cleveland State University draws on this meritocratic narrative, writing that “achieving optimal health for [oneself] is a continuous journey.”²⁰⁶ The University of Minnesota gets close to a meaningful acknowledgment of the systemic conditions that impact collective well-being when it states that “college students today face unprecedented rates of stress, mental health issues, addiction, and financial barriers that prevent them from achieving wellbeing and academic success,” but undermines this in its reassertion of an individual responsibility narrative through its framing of well-being in terms of individual achievement.²⁰⁷ The persistent reference to well-being as achievement demonstrates yet another way in which neoliberal ideology pervades the well-being university.

In addition to framing well-being itself as an achievement, discourse within higher education well-being initiatives also draws excessive connection between well-

204. Brayton, “‘Madness’ of Market Logic,” 69.

205. Wake Forest University, “Home.”

206. Cleveland State University, “Shine Well.”

207. University of Minnesota, “Student Corner.”

being and broader notions of success. Before exploring this theme, it is important to acknowledge that under neoliberalism, notions of “success” are largely understood in financial terms and associated with the accumulation of material wealth.²⁰⁸ Due to the hegemonic nature of neoliberalism, which is pervasive in higher education, this is implicitly the case regardless of the intentions of the well-being university.²⁰⁹ Exemplifying the over-association made between well-being and success, Vanderbilt University writes, “mental wellbeing is central to the success of all” and George Mason University writes, “our ability to thrive and succeed – as a student, as an employee, as an organization, and in our lives – is directly correlated to our degree of well-being.”²¹⁰ This not only links individuals’ success to their own “degree of well-being,” but also positions them as individually responsible for the success of the organizations of which they are a part, having particularly problematic implications for employees who are encouraged to enhance their well-being in order to expand their productivity and job performance in the neoliberal workplace.²¹¹ It must be noted as well that this notion, “degree of well-being,” also has evaluative implications associated with surveillance, assessment and self-

208. Wrenn, “Identity Politics and Neoliberalism”, 503; Esposito and Perez, “Neoliberalism, Commodification of Mental Health”, 416.

209. See Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, in connection to pervasiveness of neoliberal hegemony within higher education.

210. Vanderbilt University, “Strategic Planning Committee,” 5; George Mason University, “Well-Being: An Overview.”

211. Day and Penney, “Essential Elements,” 315-317; See also: chapter 4 for a discussion of employers’ neoliberal motivations for well-being initiatives.

optimization within a neoliberal labor force.²¹² This is because, within neoliberal institutions, evaluative practices are largely employed in order to ensure the enhancement of workers' performance and productivity.²¹³ Thus, "degree of well-being" becomes yet another criteria against which individuals may be surveilled and assessed. By linking well-being and success in a way that positions well-being as a critical factor in the achievement of individual success, the term "well-being" itself is imbued with neoliberal meaning which has economic and normative implications.

Success is also frequently connected to ability by higher education well-being initiatives, an assertion that relies on the normative positioning of dis/ability as a condition of individual "body-minds" (to use Eli Clare's language), which I explore in more depth in the following section.²¹⁴ Wake Forest University demonstrates this success-well-being connection when it writes,

Consequences [of mental health issues] in the workplace are often destructive to careers. They include decreased productivity, missed deadlines and inattentive work product; unwillingness to be a team player; lateness; and safety problems or accidents.²¹⁵

212. Ball, "Performativity, Commodification and Commitment," 18; Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 24-26.

213. Ball, "Performativity, Commodification and Commitment," 18.

214. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 8. Clare uses the term "body-minds" to describe the way in which bodies and minds are inextricable from each other yet are consistently positioned as distinct in ableist society.

215. Wake Forest University, "Emotional," under "Faculty & Staff."

This thought is immediately followed by a warning that “depressed employees [are] four times more likely to lose their jobs than others,” an issue that is framed as connected to individuals’ “general reluctance to confront the problem [of depression].”²¹⁶ In this example, Wake Forest neglects to recognize or critically analyze the ways in which corporatized employment structures at the neoliberal university negatively impact employees’ mental health, nor the ways in which these institutions are not designed to be accessible for employees with mental/psychological disabilities.²¹⁷ In this way, mental/psychological disabilities are framed as liabilities to employers, as incompatible with career success, and as undesirable “issues” that reside within individuals that, it is implied, are their responsibilities to resolve.

In addition to being articulated as connected in a causal sense, success and well-being are also positioned *as* abilities themselves. This is reflected when Colorado State University highlights its well-being initiative’s intention to “strengthen students’ ability to be successful” and Vanderbilt University notes its intention to “enhance students’ ability to thrive.”²¹⁸ It is also demonstrated by Liberty University in the way it outlines the recognized dimensions of well-being encompassed by its programming. It frames emotional well-being as “the ability to deal with feelings, to cope with stress, and to live independently”; physical well-being as “the functional and operational soundness of the

216. Wake Forest University, “Emotional,” under “Faculty & Staff.”

217. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 65-66; Jung, “Chronic Illness and Educational Equity,” 270; See also Price, *Mad at School*.

218. Colorado State University, “Well-Being Initiatives”; Vanderbilt University, “About Us.”

body”; financial well-being as “the capacity to manage one’s financial resources in such a way as to promote autonomy and security”; and social well-being as “the ability to interact with others.”²¹⁹

The layers of ableism in these examples are egregious, recognizable in the valorization of a number of normative ideals and ways of being. It is evident in the fetishization of autonomy and independence, which stems from the ableist and neoliberal demonization of dependency that coincides with the positioning of disability as overly dependent and burdensome.²²⁰ It is also evident in the valorization of body-mind regulation, “functioning” and “operational soundness,” which rely on normative expectations of individual body-minds, such as the ability to “regulate” the self in order to “act in ways that *appear* normal.”²²¹ These body-mind expectations – regulation, “functioning” and “operational soundness” – also seemingly point to a perception of people as machines of production and disability as defectiveness, notions which stem from neoliberalism’s definition of disability as a “lack of productivity” and positioning of individuals with disabilities as failing to be “smoothly running engines” and thus as “defective products.”²²² Additionally, ableism at the well-being university is evident through these examples in the valorization of “social well-being” as the ability to

219. Liberty University, “Dimensions of Wellness.”

220. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 135-136; Davy, “Ethic of Care,” 101-105.

221. Cox, “Passing as Sane,” 104; Liberty University, “Dimensions of Wellness.”

222. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 54.

“interact” normatively with others.²²³ This expectation erases a broad range of ways in which individuals experience sociality, potentially exacerbating the ways in which people with mental/psychological disabilities are already othered in higher education and expected to conform to normative modes of interaction at the risk of professional and academic repercussions.²²⁴ Through the language employed by these higher education well-being initiatives, particularly in the example from Liberty University, “well-being” no longer describes an abstract state of “thriving” or “flourishing,” but instead becomes coded language for ability, or rather the *absence* – or perceived absence – of disability. In this way, the intelligibility of individuals’ well-being in higher education is made to require the performance of able-normativity.²²⁵

This is complicated by some higher education well-being initiatives who explicitly highlight that mental illness does not preclude mental health and well-being. For example, Hendrix College writes, “having a mental illness does not mean you cannot or do not have high well-being” and that, “conversely, not having a mental illness does not necessarily mean you have high well-being.”²²⁶ Vanderbilt University reaffirms this idea, writing,

223. Liberty University, “Dimensions of Wellness.”

224. Price, *Mad at School*, 5-7, 111-140.

225. See Cox, “Passing as Sane”, 103 for a nuanced analysis of the performance and performativity of in/sanity as it relates to “passing as sane” among people with mental illness.

226. Hendrix College, “What is Well-Being?”

We make a distinction here because mental health and mental illness are neither the same entity nor necessarily diametrically opposed to each other. For example, one may have a mental illness and be in excellent mental health; conversely, one may have no mental illness but, for various reasons, may be unable to function well, emotionally, psychologically or socially. When this occurs, this individual is exhibiting poor mental health.²²⁷

In these delineations of mental illness, mental health and well-being, the lines of dis/ability are blurred, the implications of which are complex. On the one hand, it is important that the well-being university acknowledges that mental/psychological disability should not be understood as a sentence to a less-than-desirable life, as is so common in ableist rhetoric.²²⁸ On the other hand, the particular ways in which mental illness, mental health and well-being are delineated may still represent a particular ableist perception of individuals' way of being, regardless of the well-being university's intentions. Specifically, by discussing mental illness as able to be aligned with well-being, and poor mental health as the inability to "function well," the well-being university pathologizes any way of being, regardless of diagnosis, that does not align with an expectation of normative functioning and positions it in contrast to its construction of well-being. Peta Cox's analysis of the performance of in/sanity touches on this phenomenon present at the well-being university. She writes,

227. Chancellor's Strategic Planning Committee, "Strategic Plan."

228. Taylor, "Lives Worth Living," para. 2.

By contrast, the acting of mental health, even when a person experiences that acting as a false presentation, is an aspect of *being* “mentally healthy.” Western culture understands the “ability to continue acting ‘normal’” as part of the definition, and the experience, of good mental health.²²⁹

In this way, the well-being university reconfigures the terms of dis/ability and positions well-being as necessarily linked to the performance of ability, or the ability to present oneself in an able-normative way.

As we interrogate the ways in which ability and well-being are framed by the well-being university as interdependent, it is important to remember the centrality of “success” in this discourse. As previously analyzed, the well-being university consistently positions well-being in relation to success, success and well-being in relation to ability, and all of these normative ideals in relation to neoliberal performance. While much of this connection between ability, success, well-being and neoliberal performance is made implicit by the well-being university in its repeated reference to each in relation to one or more of the others, some higher education well-being initiatives delineate an over-association between them in more overt or succinctly capturable ways. For example, I reference a previously quoted thought from Texas Woman’s University: “when we are well [read: *perceivably currently-able*], we are more productive and can more easily find satisfaction in life.”²³⁰ Similarly, the University of California, Berkeley asserts this connection for students, writing,

229. Cox, “Passing as Sane,” 103.

230. Texas Woman’s University, “Co-Curricular Framework.”

Taking care of yourself translates to being more successful in school. Merely working harder does not ensure doing better. In fact, we know that academic success is related to ability, work, academic skills and wellness.²³¹

In these examples, ability, success and well-being are positioned as interdependent ideals in relation to the normative values of neoliberalism (i.e., Productivity, individual skill and success itself). This is consistent with the way in which neoliberalism broadly conflates notions of success, happiness and personal fulfillment with competitiveness and wealth accumulation that must be attained through individual self-optimization and is positioned as largely incompatible with disability.²³² These normative ideals – ability, success, well-being and neoliberal performance – are positioned as though they exist in a relationship of compulsory interdependence, such that a perceived deficiency in one will necessarily impact the degree to which the others will be experienced. It is this relationship that I refer to as the *neoliberal matrix of ability/success/well-being*.

In framing this matrix, I loosely draw on Judith Butler’s heterosexual matrix, which she uses to describe the way in which “‘intelligible’ genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.”²³³ To put it simply, it is through this heterosexual matrix that subjects who deviate from the naturalized relationship between, and

231. University of California, Berkeley, “Be Well Cal.”

232. See Esposito and Perez, “Neoliberalism, Commodification, Mental Health,” 416 for a discussion of mental health, neoliberal performance, success, happiness, and the pathologization of ways of being that do not conform to normative neoliberal values; See also, Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 54.

233. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 17.

normative expectations of, any of the interdependent categories – gender/sex/desire – are deemed deviant, unintelligible and incoherent.²³⁴ I do not wish to analogize Butler’s critical analysis of sex, gender and sexuality to my own analysis of well-being, but rather draw on Butler’s heterosexual matrix as a conceptual framework to assist in the articulation of the way in which, under neoliberal and ableist hegemony, ability, success, well-being and neoliberal performance are positioned as naturally interdependent and compositional of intelligible well-being. These conditions for intelligibility are further reinforced by a neoliberal system that labels individuals “defective” if they “specifically [lack] the ambition or means of achieving financial success,” qualities that, as I have identified, are heavily linked to ability and well-being.²³⁵ Despite some higher education well-being initiatives reassurance that well-being is uniquely definable by the individual, intelligible well-being is, in practice, that which maintains “relations of coherence and continuity” among ability, success, well-being and neoliberal performance, as demonstrated throughout my analysis.²³⁶

The neoliberal matrix of ability/success/well-being is implicated, then, in the well-being university’s drive to promote “cultures of well-being” on their campuses. Articulating this culture-making desire, the University of Richmond identifies that its mission is “to create and sustain a culture and community of health and well-being” in

234. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 17.

235. Wrenn, “Identity Politics and Neoliberalism,” 503; Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 54.

236. Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 17; For language of “unique” well-being, see College of St. Scholastica, “Employee WellU”; Florida Agricultural and Mechanical University, “Rattler Wellness.”

order to “[help] all individuals reach their full potential.”²³⁷ The University of Michigan writes that it hopes to “[build] a culture of well-being, where you can embrace the concept that success in life goes beyond the classroom and careers.”²³⁸ Relatedly, Texas Woman’s University highlights that its goal is to create conditions in which “every member of [its] community will identify health and wellbeing as an essential thread woven through the fabric of their Texas Woman’s experience.”²³⁹ Building on my analysis of the ways in which intelligible well-being is heavily linked to ability, success and neoliberal performance, it is evident that the well-being university’s insistence on the production of cultures of well-being has normative implications that must be acknowledged. In fact, I argue that “cultures of well-being,” due to their entrenchment in ableist and neoliberal hegemonies (represented in my framing of the neoliberal matrix of ability/success/well-being), more likely refer to the cheerful acceptance of, performance of and conformity to the ableist and neoliberal status quo.²⁴⁰ This demonstrates how the well-being university becomes not only a vehicle of neoliberal governmentality, but also of ableism.²⁴¹ In the following section, I further discuss the persistence of ableism in the well-being university’s medicalization of well-being and disability.

237. University of Richmond, “Mission Statement.”

238. University of Michigan, “Well-Being Now.”

239. Texas Woman’s University, “About the Initiative.”

240. Nicki, “The Abused Mind”, 94. Nicki outlines what she refers to as the “cultural demand of cheerfulness” and its impact on people with disabilities.

241. Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*; Cotoi, “Neoliberalism: A Foucauldian Perspective”, 113. Cotoi outlines the way in which governmentality implies a governing

Medicalizing Well-Being and the Politics of Cure

A central tension in critical disability studies is that between the medical and social models of disability. In the medical model, disability is positioned as individual body-mind deviation from a norm largely decided by the medical-industrial-complex.²⁴² These deviations are pathologized and framed as problems to be fixed, treated, overcome and cured in and by individuals themselves, largely through medical or medical-adjacent means.²⁴³ In contrast, the social model positions disability as a construct stemming from the relationships between people and the ableist systems, institutions, environments and cultures within which they live.²⁴⁴ I argue that, while not always overt, the logic of the medical model of disability, and the pro-cure politics associated with it, heavily influence the discourse of well-being put forth in higher education.

A prime example of the medical model of disability is on display in the well-being university's discussion of mental health and mental illness, which are central features of many well-being initiatives.²⁴⁵ For example, Wake Forest University relies

“by and through [individuals'] own interests”; See also Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 155, which describes how “neoliberalism creates an all-invasive governmentality that ‘governs without governing.’”

242. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 8, 69-71.

243. Clare, 8, 76-80.

244. Nishida, “Neoliberal Academia”, 150.

245. For centrality of mental health in well-being initiatives, see Vanderbilt University, “Strategic Planning Committee”; Texas Woman’s University, “Mind Well.”

solely on a medical conception of depression, simplifying it to a “matter of brain chemistry” and genetics.²⁴⁶ Similarly, the University of Minnesota writes,

While depression and anxiety are usually categorized as mental illnesses, we find it more useful to think of them as disruptions in brain health, which is directly related to the physical makeup and mechanisms of the brain, as well as emotional and relational issues.²⁴⁷

Part of the reason that these strictly medicalized discussions of mental/psychological disability are problematic is due to the fact that these are the only ways in which they are framed by many higher education institutions. Often, as is the case in the previous two examples, these institutions provide no supplementary acknowledgement of the ways in which the neoliberal university contributes to student and employee experiences of depression and other mental/psychological disabilities, nor do they outline constructive ways in which they are creating environments that are fully accessible to people with mental/psychological disabilities.²⁴⁸

At the well-being university, the lack of a broader acknowledgement of institutional ableism, issues of inaccessibility and the harmful impacts of expanding neoliberalization results in the positioning of disability as an issue contained within individual body-minds.²⁴⁹ Expanding on the previous example in which

246. Wake Forest University, “Emotional,” under “Faculty & Staff.”

247. University of Minnesota, “Using an Integrated Approach.”

248. Kezar, DePaola and Scott, *The Gig Academy*, 65.

mental/psychological disability is discussed in terms of “brain health,” the University of Minnesota goes on to reassure its students, faculty and staff: “you can change your brain”; that “instead of being a static organ that doesn’t change after adolescence, the brain is now seen as having a lifelong dynamic ability to change in response to its environment.”²⁵⁰ In this way, individuals are asked to recognize the impacts of environmental conditions on “brain health” – rather, mental/psychological disabilities – but to focus instead on the ways in which they should alter themselves rather than place responsibility on those with the power to alter institutional conditions. In addition to perpetuating neoliberal responsabilization, which I have critiqued elsewhere in my analysis in regard to similar “change your brain” language, this discourse also serves to locate disability in the individual, relying on a pervasive medical model of disability.²⁵¹ The University of Minnesota also demonstrates this individualization of disability from another angle when it identifies depression as a “disabling condition that adversely affects a person's family, work, or school life” rather than identifying ableist society and institutions as “disabling” (like Akemi Nishida does when she refers to the “debilitating impacts of neoliberal academia” or Eli Clare when he discusses “locating the problems of injustice not in individual body-mind but in the world”).²⁵²

249. See Nishida, “Neoliberal Academia”, 150 for further discussion of this individual responsibility discourse around disability in academia.

250. University of Minnesota, “Using an Integrated Approach.”

251. See chapter 4 for a discussion of individual responsibility discourse and a reference to the well-being university’s call for students to “change their brains.”

The well-being university also demonstrates a pervasive medical ideology in its persistent positioning of fatness as a threat to individuals' health and well-being. This is a critical point of focus in the context of my analysis of institutional ableism and medicalization due to the fact that disability is so frequently invoked in the discourse of fatness, particularly through the assumptions that "fatness is a choice, and that it typically leads to disability."²⁵³ Stemming out of this discourse, many well-being initiatives frame fatness as a "chronic disease," "health complication" or "risk" in need of management or prevention.²⁵⁴ In these cases, fatness is presented as an undesirable outcome of which individuals should be wary – mirroring the ableist use of "disability and chronic illness as cautionary tales"²⁵⁵ – positing that through physical activity, individuals can not only prevent fatness but also the poor health and well-being outcomes to which they attribute it.²⁵⁶ In fact, some well-being initiatives present fatness alongside "premature death" in their lists of negative consequences of inactivity on well-being.²⁵⁷ As such, "movement" is sold as the precautionary action individuals must take in order to increase their

252. University of Minnesota, "What is Depression?"; Nishida, "Neoliberal Academia," 145; Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 12-13.

253. Mollow, "Unvictimizable," 106.

254. University of Richmond, "Exercise is Medicine"; University of Minnesota, "Why Is Physical Activity."

255. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 56.

256. Texas Woman's University, "Move Well"; University of Minnesota, "Why Is Physical Activity."

257. University of Minnesota, "Why Is Physical Activity"; See Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 129 for discussion of the frequent pairing of death and disability in ableist discourse in a way that suggests the "un-choosing" of disability.

“chances of living longer.”²⁵⁸ It is necessary to recognize that this discourse, which serves to medicalize and pathologize fatness, also stems from society’s fatphobic panic over a supposed “obesity epidemic” and is rooted in an economic and cultural politics that fuels public discourse and biased scientific data production.²⁵⁹ Particularly, anti-fatness serves to uphold racist, sexist and classist ideologies and to fuel a neoliberal discourse of individual responsibility that seeks to shift healthcare costs onto individuals and increase profits from weight loss treatments offered by the medical-industrial-complex.²⁶⁰

Due to its entrenchment in the medical-industrial-complex and ableist hegemony, the aforementioned medical model of disability inevitably facilitates a pro-cure politics that is obsessed with diagnosis, treatment, cure and ultimately the eradication of disability itself.²⁶¹ This is a politics that pervades ableist society.²⁶² The politics of cure is laden with a tension between the resistance of the violence of ableism that dominates so much of the motivation and discourse around cure, and a recognition of the tangible ways in which many people with disabilities have complex, ongoing relationships with the

258. Texas Woman’s University, “Move Well.”

259. Campos et al., “The Epidemiology of Overweight and Obesity”.

260. Campos et al., “The Epidemiology of Overweight and Obesity,” 58; Mollow, “Unvictimized,” 105-106.

261. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 70-71, 25-28.

262. Clare, xvi.

medical-industrial-complex and its focus on diagnosis, treatment and cure.²⁶³ Navigating this politics is not a straightforward undertaking. Expressing this, Eli Clare writes,

Holding it all – sickness and human vulnerability, health and disability, the need for and the resistance of cure – is much harder work than writing anti-cure diatribes, and much more necessary.²⁶⁴

With this in mind, my intention is not to take a stark oppositional stance in the pro-/anti-cure politics debate – an uneven terrain to be traversed with nuance and care – rather, my intention is to present an analysis of the ways in which the well-being university perpetuates an ableist understanding of well-being that conforms to a predominant pro-cure politics without adequate nuance or self-awareness. Particularly, I argue that the well-being university enlists elements of a pro-cure politics that include treatment, management, overcoming, prevention and eradication of illness and disability in its well-being discourses.

Management and treatment are central features of the politics of cure, entailing the “diminishment” and “moderation” of what Clare refers to as “the trouble” in individual body-minds.²⁶⁵ The well-being university relies on this element of the pro-cure politics, encouraging students, faculty and staff to engage in self-regulation and self-management of their emotions, attention and a variety of symptoms of mental/psychological disabilities using “mindfulness” and other technologies of the self

263. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 60-62, 183-184.

264. Clare, 62.

265. Clare, 70.

(framed by Eastern Tennessee State University as the “appropriate ‘tools’ to make you a healthier and happier human being”).²⁶⁶ In urging students to get adequate sleep, the University of California, Berkeley leverages the pro-cure logic of “managing disability” when it writes,

Earning a badge of heroism doesn’t come with sleep deprivation either. Instead lack of sleep contributes to decreased focus and attention, faulty decision making, irritability, anxiety & stress, depression and worsening of Bipolar mood swings.²⁶⁷

This language conveys the subtextual message that “*if you don’t take care of yourself by getting adequate sleep, your symptoms (of diagnosed mental/psychological disabilities or otherwise) will be more pronounced, which is undesirable.*” This is put more bluntly by the University of Minnesota, which writes,

[The] reduction [of physical symptoms of stress] is greatly desirable, because physical symptoms of persistent stress are associated with an increased risk of serious diseases such as high blood pressure, heart irregularities, insomnia, persistent fatigue, digestive disorders, mental health issues, diminished fertility, and diabetes.²⁶⁸

266. University of Chicago, “Mental Well-Being”; University of California, Berkeley. “Be Well Cal” under “Sleep”; University of Minnesota, “Mindfulness for Stress Reduction”; Ng, “Critique of Mindfulness,” 138-140; Eastern Tennessee State University, “Well-Being.”

267. University of California, Berkeley. “Be Well Cal” under “Sleep.”

268. University of Minnesota, “How Does Mindfulness Work?”

In both of these examples, rather than recognizing and critiquing the “body-mind-breaking work conditions” of the neoliberal university and the fact that many students have to work long hours in order to pay for the rising costs of their education, well-being initiatives medicalize individuals’ lack of adequate sleep and experiences of stress.²⁶⁹ This implies that it is their responsibility to modify themselves and their behavior in order to ensure their proper compliance with neoliberalism and ableism, a task which requires the treatment and management of any symptoms that deviate from these hegemonic norms.

Wake Forest University further exemplifies the way in which pro-cure politics intersects with neoliberalism, explaining that for people with depression,

Help is not only possible; it’s highly effective. Various estimates say 80 percent or more of those who seek treatment report a considerable reduction of symptoms and restored quality of life. Even in the case of those who lose their jobs, treatment makes a significant positive impact on getting back into the workforce.²⁷⁰

In this example, depression is positioned as largely incompatible with both individuals’ careers and (presumably good) qualities of life. These are positioned as reasons for individuals with mental/psychological disabilities to seek treatment to reduce their

269. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 62; For a discussion of trends around higher education students and work, see St. Amour, “Working College Students.” St. Amour articulates the types of work differences between lower- and higher-income students and, through her discussion, expresses (uncritically) the ways in which even the types of work students engage in is influenced by the neoliberal demand to increase individual marketability of students to future employers.

270. Wake Forest University, “Emotional” under “Faculty & Staff.”

symptoms and “restore” themselves to ways of being that are assumed to be preferable to their present selves or experiences.²⁷¹ Eli Clare articulates the ableist origins of this “restoration” discourse, which “grounds itself in an original state of being, relying on a belief that what existed before is superior to what exists currently,” and ultimately “seek[s] to return what is damaged to that former state of being.”²⁷² Of course, as Clare urges in his nuanced perspective on the politics of cure, it must be recognized that there are those with mental/psychological disabilities (i.e., depression) for whom the possibility of the reduction of certain symptoms may in fact be preferential. However, it is the sweeping and unnuanced use of the language of treatment and restoration by the well-being university, especially when rooted in neoliberal motivations, of which we should be wary and critical.

Beyond the ways in which the well-being university encourages individuals to manage and treat any symptoms that do not align with ableist and neoliberal expectations, some well-being initiatives highlight broader attempts to integrate a medical model of disability into their programming through the funneling of university resources into medical research. While this was not the case on most of the higher education well-being programs I analyzed, I still present this finding here as a demonstration of the breadth of the medicalized well-being discourse on display in higher education. Demonstrating this medical research approach, in its “Strategic Plan for Mental Health and Well-Being,” Vanderbilt University identifies its goal to:

271. See Brayton, “‘Madness’ of Market Logic,” 69 for discussion of “healing [as] the restoration of productivity.”

272. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 15.

Launch a neurodiversity initiative and expand this area of research to encompass mood disorder and precision medicine to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and support Vanderbilt's becoming a leading institution with regard to these areas of research [...] Vanderbilt also should continue to foster the research centers dedicated to the study and treatment of mental disorders.²⁷³

In this case, rather than investing its resources into creating a truly accessible campus or into challenging ableism, Vanderbilt University identifies its desire to expand medical research into “mood disorders,” “mental disorders” and “precision medicine.”²⁷⁴ This mirrors a trend within the medical-industrial-complex which often leads to the prioritization of research and policy around preventative medicine, treatment and cure over present and long-term care needs of people with disabilities and those in their networks of care.²⁷⁵

In addition to their reliance on a pro-cure politics of treatment and management of symptoms not aligned with normative expectations, many higher education well-being initiatives leverage an expectation of “overcoming” that is an insidious symptom of ableism.²⁷⁶ This “overcoming narrative” implies an ableist understanding of disability as

273. Chancellor's Strategic Planning Committee, “Strategic Plan,” 18.

274. Chancellor's Strategic Planning Committee, 18.

275. Chaufan et al., “Medical Ideology as a Double-Edged Sword,” 792-793.

276. See DeVolder, “Overcoming the Overcoming Story,” 746 for an extensive critique of the overcoming narrative and what she coins “compulsory heroism”; Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 8-9.

a “personal deficit” that must be privately and “heroically” overcome.²⁷⁷ In this way, disability is positioned as incompatible with success, and overcoming is valorized.²⁷⁸ In the context of pro-cure politics, overcoming is “cure’s backup plan.”²⁷⁹

Exemplifying the pervasiveness of the overcoming narrative in higher education well-being initiatives, the University of Minnesota writes,

But many of us aren’t [experiencing well-being]. Our lifestyle or life conditions are causing harm, manifesting as fatigue or anxiety or even physical pain [...] The good news is that—with practice, we can enhance our wellbeing and achieve a state of balance and contentment. We can flourish!²⁸⁰

From a similar perspective, an article published on CampusWell, a core partner to the College of St. Scholastica’s well-being initiative reads, “it can be tempting to avoid, but by facing challenges in a step-by-step manner, OCD and anxiety will improve, and you will be free to navigate the world and accomplish your goals.”²⁸¹ Here, mental/psychological disabilities are positioned as incompatible with success, well-being and neoliberal performance – yet another manifestation of the neoliberal matrix of ability/success/well-being – and students, faculty and staff are encouraged to overcome their disabilities and undesirable symptoms through “practice” and “facing challenges in

277. Price, *Mad at School*, 104.

278. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 8-9.

279. Clare, 10.

280. University of Minnesota, “What is Wellbeing?”

281. DelVecchio, “Navigating Life.”

a step-by-step manner.” Through these means, individuals are reassured that they can flourish, accomplish their goals and become “free to navigate the world.” It is implied, then, that disability is naturally incompatible with “freedom” and individuals’ navigation of the world. This assumes a normative standard for how people experience and interact with the world and also neglects to recognize the ways in which ableism is built into our institutions, our infrastructure, our policy and our society as a whole, making innumerable spaces inaccessible for many.²⁸² In place of an acknowledgement of this systemic issue, individuals are encouraged to overcome their personal “challenges” instead.²⁸³

Further exemplifying the pervasiveness of the overcoming narrative at the well-being university, Vanderbilt University highlights that one of the goals of its well-being initiative is to:

Identify individuals within the Vanderbilt community who have successfully faced mental illness, addiction, or mental health challenges and who are comfortable sharing their experiences and establish appropriate forums and venues for those individuals to share their experiences on a continuing basis”.²⁸⁴

While there is surely value in creating space for people to discuss their experiences with mental illness and develop meaningful community around disability, Vanderbilt’s

282. See any number of texts that outline the entrenchment of ableism in society and its institutions. For example, Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*; Price, *Mad at School*; and Jung, “Chronic Illness and Educational Equity.”

283. DelVecchio, “Navigating Life.”

284. Chancellor's Strategic Planning Committee, “Strategic Plan,” 16.

approach has an ableist undertone in its apparent valorization of individuals' overcoming of disability. This is evidenced in their reference to individuals who have "successfully faced mental illness."²⁸⁵ It can be inferred from this messaging that successfully facing mental illness implies overcoming it and that by listening to people's overcoming narratives, others will be able to transcend their disabilities, too.

The network of "overlapping and interlocking medical processes" that enact pro-cure politics ultimately points to the prevention and eradication of disability, an ableist motive which, I argue, is perpetuated by the well-being university.²⁸⁶ This is demonstrated in the "lifetime of health" language used within higher education well-being initiatives to encourage students to modify their "lifestyles" now in order to prevent illness and disability in the future.²⁸⁷ Once again, the well-being university uses disability as a "cautionary tale," which it contrasts against its "lifetime of health" narrative that has no room for disability within it.²⁸⁸ For example, after encouraging faculty and staff to develop their "intellectual well-being" through "curiosity," Wake Forest University goes on to write,

But if the abstraction doesn't hook you, perhaps the practical will. A 2012 study published in the scientific journal *Neurology* referenced 101 people who were

285. Chancellor's Strategic Planning Committee, 16.

286. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 70-71.

287. University of Richmond, "Creating a Culture," 5; Georgia Institute of Technology, "Mental Health."

288. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 56; Wake Forest University, "Intellectual," under "Faculty & Staff"; University of Richmond, "Creating a Culture," 5.

eventually diagnosed with dementia. Those who had regularly done crossword puzzles, played board games or undertaken similar pursuits had an extra year of mental acuity than those who were not as engaged. The study compared the benefits favorably to a year of college in delaying the onset of mental decline.²⁸⁹

Using the “onset” of mental/psychological disability as a foil to the imagined “lifetime of wellness” (not explicitly referenced in this example but which is always present in the ableist imagination as what Jasbir Puar calls a “fantasy of endless capacity”), the well-being university positions disability as naturally undesirable and leverages ableist insecurities to motivate individuals’ compliance with its advertised technologies of the self (in this case, “crossword puzzles,” “board games” and “similar pursuits”).²⁹⁰

Further positioning disability as incompatible with well-being and perpetuating a pro-cure politics of prevention and eradication, Xavier University of Louisiana writes, “wellness is more than being free from illness, it is a dynamic process of change and growth.”²⁹¹ In framing well-being as “more than being free from illness,” Xavier University acknowledges that, from its perspective, the absence of illness is a foundational, albeit only partial, element of well-being. This perpetuates what Margaret Price calls a “well/unwell paradigm” in which anything defined as illness is a problem in need of medical intervention.²⁹² The prevention and eradication of illness, then, is shown

289. Wake Forest University, “Intellectual,” under “Faculty & Staff.”

290. See Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 11 for a discussion of “ableist fantasies of endless capacity”; Wake Forest University, “Intellectual,” under “Faculty & Staff.”

291. Xavier University of Louisiana, “What is Wellness?”

to be central to well-being as it is articulated by the well-being university. Additionally, in its framing as both the absence of illness and a process of “growth and change,” higher education’s understanding of well-being further conforms to neoliberal standards of continual self-improvement. It is not enough to be “free from illness,” one must further responsabilize themselves to conform to neoliberal and ableist standards. Bruce Cohen articulates this concept well, writing,

Laid thick with the values of neoliberalism, the discourse of “positive mental health” no longer focuses primarily on bringing the “insane” back to some state of normality but rather on the self-improvement of the individual. It is no longer enough to be “sane” or “normal”; one has to be constantly striving to be more positive and happier in life. This is a therapeutic quest which perfectly aligns with the neoliberal philosophy of personal responsibility and the need to constantly improve the self.²⁹³

In these ways, the ableist drive to prevent and eradicate disability is made to occupy a space alongside neoliberal demands of individual responsibility and self-improvement, the two hegemonies blending into each other under a medicalized, pro-cure politics.

As previously mentioned, the medical model of disability and both the politics of cure and medicalized understanding of well-being that it enables all fuel and are fueled by an undercurrent of systemic ableism entrenched in higher education and society at

292. See Price, *Mad at School*, 12 for further analysis of the “well/unwell paradigm” in the context of mental illness.

293. Cohen, *Psychiatric Hegemony*, 86.

large.²⁹⁴ In the following section, I build on this foundation to further explore the ways in which the well-being university perpetuates ableism through the naturalization of able-normativity and the othering of disability.

Able-Normativity and Disability as Other

Ableism and able-normativity are deeply embedded in higher education and manifest in countless ways across its institutions.²⁹⁵ Well-being initiatives are not exempt from this institutionalized ableism and in fact, I argue, unwittingly serve as sites where ableism and able-normativity are reinforced while disability is othered through a wide range of discursive practices beyond the medical model of disability already discussed.

Ableism shows up in higher education well-being initiatives through the normative framing of well-being as naturally desirable, while disability, in contrast, is discursively positioned as undesirable. Cleveland State University demonstrates this when it asserts, without question, the following normative understanding of well-being:

Think brain power! Enjoy the benefits of sharper mental acuity, increased intelligence, and a more capable mind. Developing this dimension of wellness can help improve judgement, intuition, reasoning, critical thinking, problem-solving, comprehension, and cognitive abilities.²⁹⁶

294. Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 5-6; Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*; Price, *Mad at School*.

295. See Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 31; Price, *Mad at School*; Jung, “Chronic Illness and Educational Equity.”

296. Cleveland State University, “Shine Well: Developmental Wellness.”

Similarly, the University of Minnesota writes, “and as a bonus, you are likely to think more clearly and have better motor control!”²⁹⁷ The ableist “benefits” and “bonuses” advertised here (ie. Improved comprehension, cognitive abilities, motor control and clearer thought) are presented as though they were naturally desirable, thus reinforcing the ableist positioning of disability as undesirable and pointing to the entrenchment of able-normativity and compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness in higher education well-being initiatives; “compulsory able-bodiedness/-mindedness” describing the way in which able-normativity functions as a “disciplinary formation” that “cover[s] over, with the appearance of choice, a system in which there actually is no choice.”²⁹⁸

Unfortunately, the language highlighted above is pervasive in higher education well-being initiatives, which often feature “developmental” and/or “intellectual” well-being as dimensions of their programming.²⁹⁹ Yet, while framed in the language of “well-being,” these specific dimensions must be read for what they implicitly suggest: the absence of what are deemed to be deviations from intellectual and developmental norms. As such, it is important to recognize that the obsession with enhancing intelligence and cognitive ability are symptomatic of ableist hegemony, which uses intelligence to “determine worthiness, value, and personhood” and has dangerous implications for

297. University of Minnesota, “Why It's Important.”

298. See McGruer, *Crip Theory*, 8 for a detailed analysis of “compulsory able-bodiedness,” which emerges out of the concept of compulsory heteronormativity; Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 6 for reference to compulsory able-mindedness.

299. Cleveland State University, “Shine Well: Developmental Wellness”; For examples of intellectual well-being dimension, see Harvard University, “Intellectual”; Mercy College, “Wellness Initiative”; Hendrix College, “Intellectual Well-Being.”

anyone who is “seen as intellectually, cognitively, or developmentally disabled.”³⁰⁰ By valorizing intelligence and cognitive ability, and demonizing “mental decline” and dependency (and the mental/psychological disabilities they imply), the well-being university perpetuates able-normativity and positions mental/psychological disability as the undesirable Other.³⁰¹

In addition to presenting an able-normative understanding of well-being as naturally desirable, the well-being university also insists that individuals engage in the ongoing practices necessary for its achievement. I refer to this pervasive phenomenon as the “wellness imperative.” Exemplifying this imperative, Cleveland State University writes,

You’ve only got [one] body and it is the vehicle that maneuvers you through every aspect of life. Properly nourishing, strengthening, and caring for your body is imperative. Optimizing physical wellness yields benefits in strength, [flexibility], endurance, balance, immune defense, self-esteem, self-control, body awareness, mood, focus and overall health.³⁰²

In addition to advertising a long list of benefits rooted in ableist and neoliberal body-mind values, which are intended to incentivize – via the fear of disability and promise of “endless capacity”³⁰³ – individuals’ engagement in physical well-being practices,

300. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 156-158.

301. For reference to “mental decline,” see Wake Forest University, “Intellectual,” under “Faculty & Staff.”

302. Cleveland State University, “Shine Well: Physical Wellness.”

Cleveland State University insists that this engagement is an inevitable and non-negotiable undertaking.

The University of Minnesota engages in a similar wellness imperative discourse in relation to emotional well-being when it writes,

In order to offset this negativity bias and experience a harmonious emotional state [...] we need to experience three positive emotions for every negative one. This [...] can be done intentionally for those of us less “wired” to positivity. These positive emotions literally reverse the physical effects of negativity and build up psychological resources that contribute to a flourishing life.³⁰⁴

In this example, individuals are encouraged to systematically overcome their negative emotions if they wish to live a “flourishing life.” The message presented here is reminiscent of Andrea Nicki’s “cultural demand of cheerfulness,” which describes the ableist imperative that people always “appear as though life were happy and carefree.”³⁰⁵ This compulsory tendency toward able-mindedness/-bodiedness is clearly demonstrated in the well-being university’s insistence on the overcompensation for body-mind vulnerability, revealing (again) the ableism in which well-being initiatives are entrenched.³⁰⁶

303. Nicki, “The Abused Mind,” 94 discusses the “fear of one’s own vulnerability”; Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 11 discusses “ableist fantasies of endless capacity.”

304. University of Minnesota, “How Do Thoughts.”

305. See Nicki, “The Abused Mind,” 94.

306. See Nicki, 94 for a reference to “vulnerability.”

The well-being university also furthers this ableist discourse when it valorizes autonomy and independence. As previously explored, higher education well-being initiatives rely heavily on a neoliberal logic of individual responsibility, which goes hand in hand with the discourse of hyper-individualism and independence.³⁰⁷ This neoliberal discourse is also deeply connected to the ableist disparaging of dependency.³⁰⁸ Beyond the numerous accounts of individual responsibility discourse articulated in chapter four, some higher education well-being initiatives explicitly make reference to “autonomy,” “agency” and “living independently” as elements of their understanding of well-being.³⁰⁹ Texas Woman’s University centers a quote from a student on its well-being “Resources” webpage that exemplifies the ableist independence ideology underpinning many well-being initiatives; it reads,

Wellbeing isn't a spa day or a state of balanced nirvana. This is grad school; I need sanity. For me, wellbeing means identifying where I am, who I am, and what I need to maintain my sanity. It's something I have to practice - an essential form of agency - so that I don't surrender my sense of self to the demands of circumstance or other people.³¹⁰

307. See chapter 4 for a detailed analysis of individual responsibility at the well-being university; Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, 14.

308. Davy, “Ethic of Care,” 101-105; Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 136.

309. Georgia Institute of Technology, “Mental Health”; Liberty University, “Dimensions of Wellness.”

310. Texas Woman’s University, “Resources.”

Perhaps there is an important message here to be extracted – one about the importance of identifying and embodying personal values – however, whatever echoes of this message that exist are encased in a masculinist and ableist rhetoric that positions the self in opposition to the world around it and frames the “agency” for this oppositional selfhood as something only possible through the maintenance of “sanity.”³¹¹

Rosemary Garland-Thomson articulates the way in which this understanding of autonomy and selfhood relies on the ableist positioning of the disabled subject as incapable of resisting “external forces” – or, in the words of Texas Woman’s University, the “demands of circumstance or other people”³¹² – writing:

[The] autonomous individual is imagined as having inviolate boundaries that enable unfettered self-determination, creating a myth of wholeness [...]
Conversely, the disabled body represents the incomplete, unbounded, compromised, and subjected body susceptible to external forces.³¹³

Additionally, Laura Davy notes that autonomy is frequently conflated with “independence and self-reliance.”³¹⁴ In this way, through the linkage of “agency,” “sanity” and “sense of self,” Texas Woman's University reifies the notion that mental/psychological disability is incongruent with independent personhood, “co-

311. See Davy, “Ethic of Care,” 101-102 for a discussion of a feminist approach to the “self”.

312. Texas Woman’s University, “Resources.”

313. Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 45, as quoted by Davy, “Ethic of Care,” 101.

314. Davy, “Ethic of Care,” 103.

constructing the non-disabled as independent agents and people with disability as dependent ‘Others.’”³¹⁵

It must be recognized as well that (in)dependence discourse is a critical focal point for analysis at the well-being university due to the way in which neoliberalism and a number of interlocking systems of oppression leverage the demonization of dependency in service of a broader economic and cultural politics that has widely marginalizing impacts.³¹⁶ In order to effectively delegitimize and dismantle social welfare policy and ensure the upward redistribution of capital, the cultural politics of race, class, gender, sexuality, immigration status and disability are leveraged to demonize the most marginalized along those lines as lazy, entitled, economically burdensome and overly dependent on the state, thus framing them as undeserving of public services and serving as a justification for further privatization.³¹⁷ This integral facet of the economic and cultural politics of neoliberalism stands in contrast to the feminist and disability justice recognition of the “utter reliance of human upon human”: the ethics of care that emphasizes our innate interdependence on each other.³¹⁸ When the well-being university integrates the rhetoric of independence and personal responsibility, it is complicit in the

315. Davy, 105; See Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 156-158 for a discussion of ableism’s denial of “personhood” to people with intellectual disabilities.

316. Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, 14; Davy, “Ethic of Care,” 101, 103; Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 101; Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 7.

317. Cohen, “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens,” 457; Mollow, “Unvictimizable,” 106.

318. Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection*, 136; Davy, “Ethic of Care,” 105; See Held, *The Ethics of Care*, 107-124 for a detailed analysis of a feminist ethics of care in the context of neoliberal market expansion.

reification of oppressive ableist and neoliberal value systems that serve to perpetuate the othering people with disabilities.

The well-being university also perpetuates the ableist othering of people with disabilities when it makes harmful associations between mental/psychological disability and criminality. It is well-documented that, under ableist hegemony, mental/psychological disability is frequently positioned as indicative of violence and criminality, such that a madness-sanity dichotomy is produced in which madness is framed as dangerous and sanity as safe.³¹⁹ On higher education campuses, this leads to the policing and surveillance of students, faculty and staff with mental/psychological disabilities in order to keep track of non-normative behavior that might be construed as “warning signs” for potential violence.³²⁰

Demonstrating the aforementioned criminalization and vilification of mental/psychological disability, Wake Forest University writes,

Left alone, mental-health issues tend to get worse over time and are highly correlated to risky behaviors such as drug and alcohol use, which have their own dangerous consequences. (Studies suggest that those with anxiety or mood disorders are twice as likely to use illicit drugs as the rest of the American adult population.)³²¹

319. Price, *Mad at School*, 143-145.

320. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 30.

321. Wake Forest University, “Emotional,” under “Faculty & Staff.”

Additionally, the University of Alabama spends considerable time on its well-being initiative webpage encouraging students to police and surveil each other, identifying behaviors that warrant formal reporting, which include such things as: “hyperactivity or rapid speech”; “difficulty concentrating”; “unwarranted aggressive/irrational behavior through words and/or actions”; “notable depression, unhappiness, or irregular emotional behavior”; “anger management problems”; “impulsivity”; “disruptive behavior in the classroom”; “uncharacteristically poor academic performance”; “excessive absences”; and “frequent sleeping in class.”³²² Wake Forest University also encourages its students to police each other, writing “A safer WFU starts with you!” and frames this policing as the act of being an “accountable bystander.”³²³ In these examples, well-being takes on an ableist tone as it associates mental/psychological disability and non-normative behavior with criminality and possible threat in need of surveillance and policing. In effect then, higher education well-being initiatives serve quite literally as “systems of surveillance of unruly bodies” and minds.³²⁴ There is seemingly no consideration of the ways in which this rhetoric may contribute to the “violent victimization of people with severe mental illnesses” on higher education campuses, which is already a significant issue.³²⁵

In highlighting the criminalization, surveillance and policing of disability on higher education campuses, it is critical to recognize that “ableism is never alone with

322. University of Alabama, “Refer a Student.”

323. Wake Forest University, “Bystander Intervention.”

324. Cosgrove and Karter, “The Poison in the Cure,” 671.

325. Price, *Mad at School*, 163.

itself”; that in fact, “ableism on college campuses is deeply racialized, as racist attitudes and practices are also ableist.”³²⁶ This means that within interlocking systems of racism and ableism, the aforementioned criminalization, surveillance and policing of non-normative behavior are deeply informed by both of these systems. This reality must be foregrounded, because the place where racism and ableism meet has particularly harmful – and often deadly – consequences for people of color with disabilities who are subjected to heightened institutional violence within the education system and beyond.³²⁷ In part, this violence takes the form of the institutional neglect and segregation of students of color with disabilities (particularly of those who are low-income) who are viewed as disruptive to the “‘normal’ functioning of schools,” and is enabled by the pervasive association made between race and disability, which has been leveraged throughout history to uphold and justify the projects of white supremacy and colonialism.³²⁸ Additionally, anti-Black racism, disability and fatphobia converge in a way that produces a contradictory double-bind in which “black people—of all sizes, but fat black people in particular—are figured as innately disabled but also as invulnerable to disability, injury, or suffering,” serving as justification for any violence inflicted upon them and in fact construing this violence as their own fault.³²⁹ When the well-being university chooses to encourage students to surveil and police non-normative behaviors that it correlates with

326. Dolmage, *Academic Ableism*, 38.

327. Erevelles and Minear, “Unspeakable Offenses,” 134-143; Mollow, “Unvictimized,” 105-106.

328. Erevelles and Minear, 132-143.

329. Mollow, 105-106.

danger, violence and threat, framing it as individuals' responsibility to enhance campus safety for all, it actually creates an approved space in which ableist and racist violence may be perpetuated.

It is evident that ableism is implicated throughout the well-being university. It is demonstrated in the persistent conflation of ability, success, well-being and neoliberal performance. It is present in the pervasive medicalized discourse of well-being that serves to pathologize non-normative behavior and unquestioningly reinforce a pro-cure politics. It is perpetuated in the positioning of an able-normative conception of well-being as naturally desirable and disability as the undesirable Other, and in the insistence that individuals engage in the prescribed practices of normative well-being. It is also exhibited in the valorization of independence as necessary for well-being. Finally, it is present in the inclusion of community policing and surveillance under the umbrella of well-being, having troubling implications along lines of race and disability. In the concluding chapter that follows, in addition to considering the nuances between various institutions' well-being initiatives and identifying some productive approaches among them, I consider the ways in which a prevalent discourse of neoliberal multiculturalism in higher education connects to an emergent trend of the co-optation of liberation movements by the well-being university. I turn then to consider the feminist ethics of care as an alternative framework of care in contrast to that which is currently in practice at the well-being university.

CHAPTER SIX: PRODUCTIVE APPROACHES TO WELL-BEING, EMERGENT TRENDS AT THE WELL-BEING UNIVERSITY AND AN EMBRACE OF FEMINIST CARE ETHICS

When analyzed from an anti-neoliberal, critical disability studies perspective, the well-being university is revealed as a site where neoliberal and ableist hegemonies thrive.³³⁰ I have argued that this is evidenced in the well-being university's corporatization and marketization of well-being and in its leveraging of pervasive individual responsibility and self-improvement discourses that both erase harmful structural conditions and place the onus for well-being on individuals. Additionally, I have argued that neoliberalism and ableism are rearticulated in and through each other in the way in which ability, success, well-being and neoliberal performance are positioned as interdependent values and aspirational qualities, producing what I call the neoliberal matrix of ability/success/well-being. I have argued as well that these interlocking hegemonies are demonstrated in the well-being university's over-reliance on medicalized conceptions of well-being that uncritically reinforce pro-cure politics. Finally, I have argued that higher education well-being initiatives reinforce institutional able-normativity while positioning the disabled subject as the undesirable, overly dependent and potentially dangerous Other.

330. The word "thrive" being re-appropriated here from the language used by the well-being university.

In the concluding sections that follow, I build on my critique thus far to briefly consider the nuances between approaches to well-being taken by Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs), historically white colleges and universities (HwCUs) and tribal colleges and universities (TCUs), as well as more productive approaches offered by some HBCUs and TCUs. Additionally, I highlight an emergent trend at the well-being university: the co-optation of anti-racist liberation movements, which, I argue, is linked to an ideology of neoliberal multiculturalism pervasive in higher education. Finally, I turn to a feminist ethics of care as a possible alternative to higher education's neoliberal, ableist approach to well-being, while considering the nuanced reality of care in the context of the ongoing resistance to oppressive systems (like neoliberalism and ableism), topics, I argue, which are in need of in-depth future analysis as they pertain to the well-being university.

Institutional Nuances and Productive Approaches to Well-Being

In analyzing well-being initiatives across sixty higher education institutions of various classifications (i.e., Public, private, women's colleges, TCUs, HBCUs and HwCUs), many overarching similarities emerged, which I have thoroughly analyzed in the preceding chapters. Put broadly, neoliberal and ableist hegemonies are identifiable across all institution types, particularly as they manifest in individual responsibility discourse and ableist, fatphobic well-being goals.³³¹ However, despite these overarching

331. For examples of individual responsibility discourse at a variety of institution types, see Wake Forest University, "Office of Wellbeing"; Howard University, "Wellness"; Scripps College, "Health and Wellness"; Mount Holyoke College, "Be Well"; Oglala Lakota College, "Rural Health Outreach"; For examples of ableism and fatphobia in well-being discourse, see Texas Woman's University, "Move Well";

themes, it is important to acknowledge the productive approaches to well-being taken by some higher education institutions. Particularly, some HBCUs and TCUs embrace collective well-being and leverage their resources in service of the communities in which they are embedded, exemplifying, I argue, a more meaningful variation of the well-being university in comparison to the predominant model explored throughout my analysis.

In beginning to consider these nuances and potentially more productive approaches, it is necessary to highlight again that the criteria for the inclusion of higher education institutions in my data collection was that they have distinct well-being initiatives or programs advertised on their websites. In drawing on a wide range of institutions, it became apparent that, compared to HwCUs, there are significantly fewer HBCUs and TCUs that fit this well-being initiative criteria and, particularly at TCUs, well-being initiatives are instead largely replaced with general fitness, counseling and student services centers.³³² For that reason, I reference some HBCUs and TCUs here that exist outside of my outlined criteria in order to adequately express key nuances between institutions that might otherwise be overlooked in this context.

Among TCUs that advertise distinct well-being initiatives, their approaches differ in meaningful ways from the neoliberal ones of many HwCUs and some large HBCUs.³³³ Particularly, there is a focus on advocacy and the meeting of students' material needs,

University of Minnesota, "Why Is Physical Activity"; Oglala Lakota College, "Rural Health Outreach"; Howard University, "Wellness."

332. Navajo Technical University, "NTU Wellness Center"; Diné College. "Counseling."

333. See chapters 4 and 5 for extended critique of neoliberal well-being initiatives on higher education campuses.

rather than on individual self-optimization as is characteristic of many of the institutions highlighted throughout my analysis.³³⁴ Leech Lake Tribal College exemplifies this approach to well-being, writing,

In addition to providing an open door and a listening ear for students, the Wellness Center offers basic hygiene supplies, donated clothing, and referrals to tribal and local services, etc. We also have various additional resources available for parenting students [...]

The Wellness Center is happy to offer private rooms available for study, counseling, and for parents (lactation/diaper changing) if needed.³³⁵

Additionally, it highlights the following service,

Mino-ayaawigaming [The Wellness Center] hosts Parent Study Group night. LLTC students are encouraged to bring their children and structured child care is [provided] by LLTC Early Child Hood students. A free meal is provided and students can go and study on campus. Get your studies done while getting to know the other parents on campus.³³⁶

In these ways, Leech Lake Tribal College recognizes that well-being in higher education is impacted by structural, material conditions and thus institutes practices that support its community in tangible ways, like creating access to hygiene supplies, clothes, food, childcare and safe spaces for community building. Instead of being framed in terms of

334. Leech Lake Tribal College, “Wellness Center.”

335. Leech Lake Tribal College.

336. Leech Lake Tribal College, “Programming.”

individuals' conformity to neoliberal and ableist expectations, well-being is instead understood as access to essential resources and community. While this initiative does not resolve overarching structural conditions, like racism and legacies of colonialism, that impact well-being – the onus of which should not be placed on indigenous communities, regardless – it does leverage its institutional resources in the active support of its community in material ways.

Further exemplifying this meaningful approach to well-being, Leech Lake Tribal College discusses its responsibility to its students when it writes, “knowing that no two paths are quite the same, we respect and honor our opportunity to walk alongside students as they seek to live their life in a good way.”³³⁷ It further identifies that this is partially achieved through the organization of community discussions on topics like: “chemical dependency, elders teaching about traditional tobacco uses, healthy relationships, AIDS/HIV rapid testing, tobacco facts bingo, financial aid, academic advising, and indigenous foods” as well as organized “traditional tobacco education”; “parent study groups”; “parenting classes”; and “talking circles” about “school, parenting, grief, addictions, or anything [students] need guidance on.”³³⁸ In contrast to the neoliberal “be your best self” language used by many of the HwCUs highlighted throughout my analysis, Leech Lake Tribal College refers to supporting students in living life in a “good

337. Leech Lake Tribal College, “Wellness Center.”

338. Leech Lake Tribal College, “Programming.”

way” through cultural education, community support and meeting specific community health needs not framed in terms of self-optimization.³³⁹

Along similar lines, rather than focusing on well-being solely within individual institutions, some HBCUs and TCUs broaden their perspectives on well-being to support the communities in which they are embedded, regardless of official affiliation to their institutions. This largely manifests as health outreach conducted by HBCUs and TCUs in surrounding communities of color. For example, six HBCUs in Tennessee partnered to form the “HBCU Wellness Project,” which is an “intervention designed to utilize the human and social capital at [HBCUs] to promote health and modify risks for chronic diseases among individuals living in the surrounding communities.”³⁴⁰ Similarly, rather than instituting an intra-institutional well-being program, Oglala Lakota College has implemented a “Rural Health Outreach Program” to address health needs of its surrounding communities.³⁴¹ In these ways, some HBCUs and TCUs recognize the position they are in to leverage their resources in a way that challenges structural barriers to health and well-being not only within their institutions, but also in the communities in which they are inextricably interconnected, essentially redistributing their resources back into communities rather than expanding their own capital accumulation in a neoliberal fashion.

339. See chapter 4 for discussion of neoliberal “be your best self” language.

340. Meharry Medical College, “HBCU Wellness Project.”

341. Oglala Lakota College, “Rural Health Outreach.”

While these community-oriented well-being initiatives are certainly a positive departure from many of the corporatized examples explored throughout my analysis, they should not be over-simplified as existing without their own harms. Particularly in the discourse of community health, I revisit my critical disability studies analysis of the ways in which the pro-cure politics attached to discourses of health often perpetuates ableism. For instance, Oglala Lakota College’s “Rural Health Outreach Program” emphasizes “diabetes prevention” through programming that encourages lifestyle changes and weight loss, while the HBCU Wellness Project promotes health through “change in knowledge, attitude, and behavior.”³⁴² In these ways, while I argue that there is meaningful potential in the emphasis on connecting communities in and outside of higher education institutions, the ways in which this work is conducted often perpetuates neoliberal individual responsibility narratives, frames disability as undesirable and in need of prevention and reinforces the fatphobic linkage of fatness and illness.³⁴³

Further complicating this however, it must also be acknowledged that as a result of structural racism and settler-colonialism in the U.S., people of color – especially Black and indigenous people – are subjected to egregious health disparities that cannot be overlooked.³⁴⁴ These health disparities are characteristic of what Achille Mbembe calls

342. Meharry Medical College, “Home”; Oglala Lakota College, “Rural Health Outreach.”

343. See chapter 4 for an extensive critique of neoliberal individual responsibility; see chapter 5 for an extensive analysis of pro-cure politics, the medical model of disability, and fatphobia, all of which are intertwined.

344. Yearby, “Structural Racism and Health Disparities,” 518-524; Kashyap, “Disparate Impacts of COVID-19.”

necropolitics, which describes the way in which systems of social and political power systematically produce conditions for certain populations to live and others to die.³⁴⁵ This is relevant here in reference to the structural conditions of racism, settler-colonialism and capitalism in the U.S. that systematically neglect Black and indigenous communities, leading to the racial health disparities previously highlighted. In this way, it makes sense that HBCUs and TCUs would opt to leverage resources in ways that support Black and indigenous communities in the face of these violent systemic conditions. This is particularly the case at TCUs, which play crucial roles in “virtually every aspect of community life.”³⁴⁶ These overlapping and contradictory details must be grappled with in the context of HBCU and TCU well-being initiatives in order to develop a more nuanced understanding of well-being initiative approaches, the implications of which differ across institutions and communities. This is perhaps a space in need of further inquiry and critical consideration.

Another space for further inquiry is the well-being university’s engagement with neoliberal multiculturalism, which I argue is connected to an emergent trend in higher education well-being initiatives: the co-optation of anti-racist liberation movements. I outline and analyze this emergent trend in the following section.

345. Mbembe, *Necropolitics*.

346. Cunningham and Parker, “Tribal Colleges as Community Institutions,” 48.

Neoliberal Multiculturalism and the Co-Optation of Anti-Racist Liberation

Movements: An Emergent Trend

The language of “diversity” is widely present in higher education spaces and is inseparable from neoliberal multiculturalism, which is characterized by a shift away from progressive-left politics toward a superficial notion of equality that is more conducive to neoliberal co-optation.³⁴⁷ In this sense, diversity and interrelated discourses of equity and inclusion often signal seemingly “uplifting,” yet in reality superficial, commitments to social justice that do not entail the transformative actions necessary to create truly liberatory outcomes.³⁴⁸ Expanding on this, Gregory Bourassa writes,

In fact, as a strategy to counter exclusion, inclusion discourses and logics are not only unable to subvert capitalism, heteropatriarchy, ableism, settler colonialism, and white supremacy or prevent their production of disposable populations, but they also tend to sustain these systems, keeping intact a political economy of normate (proper) subjects and disposable others.³⁴⁹

I argue that this form of neoliberal multiculturalism, as it manifests in the discourse of diversity and inclusion, is prevalent in higher education well-being initiatives and in need of critical analysis.

347. See Byrd, “The Diversity Distraction” for a detailed history of diversity and equity discourses in higher education; Matus and Infante, “Undoing Diversity,” 294; Duggan, *Twilight of Equality*, 44.

348. Matus and Infante, “Undoing Diversity,” 294; Smith and Mayorga-Gallo, “New Principle-Policy Gap,” 891, 894.

349. Bourassa, “Neoliberal Multiculturalism,” 257-258.

Many higher education well-being initiatives identify diversity and inclusion as core elements of their programming. For example, The University of Richmond writes that one of its core values is to:

Foster an open and inclusive community that welcomes and benefits people with diverse backgrounds, encourages the exchange of ideas from diverse perspectives, provides meaningful access to facilities and programs/services, and opposes intolerance.³⁵⁰

Similarly, the College of St. Scholastica emphasizes its use of a “multicultural and student centered wellness model that is essential for academic success.”³⁵¹ Additionally, Vanderbilt University writes,

As individuals and a community, we must celebrate the benefits that diversity brings to our collective and individual wellbeing, and acknowledge that engaging diverse perspectives is essential if we are to have a mentally healthy, inclusive community.³⁵²

Through this use of the language of diversity, inclusion and multiculturalism, the well-being university signals its alignment with liberatory goals, while still perpetuating the harmful neoliberal and ableist ideologies explored throughout my analysis, obscuring institutional violence and forgoing any transformative structural change.

350. University of Richmond, “Mission Statement.”

351. College of St. Scholastica, “Student Center for Health and Well-Being.”

352. Chancellor's Strategic Planning Committee, “Strategic Plan,” 5.

The discourse of multiculturalism is also used by the well-being university to bolster its neoliberal goals around individual responsibility, productivity and success.³⁵³ Demonstrating this, the University of Virginia’s “Student Health and Wellness” program encourages its students to “work towards equity,” writing,

An equitable community is one where everyone has the tools they need to thrive. In such a community, everyone is treated with fairness and justice and empowered to participate fully in social, cultural, and economic life.³⁵⁴

Similarly, the University of Maryland writes,

We recognize that how we think about wellness is affected by our culture and our life experiences. We strive to support inclusive, accessible, and diverse health and wellness opportunities. Our dynamic services are provided to empower students to develop a strong foundation to optimize their capacity to learn, reach their potential, enhance resiliency, and achieve their goals throughout their academic career and beyond.³⁵⁵

In these ways, equity, diversity and inclusion are framed as a means to enhance individual economic “participation,” self-optimization and success. This “uplifting” rhetoric of neoliberal multiculturalism is thus not only severed from any semblance of

353. See chapter 4 for detailed analysis of the well-being university’s neoliberal ideology and goals.

354. University of Virginia, “Community Resilience.”

355. University of Maryland, “Wellness & Advocacy.”

liberatory politics, but also perverted in the way of individual neoliberal compliance and, likely, marketing to student consumers who are drawn to this language.³⁵⁶

Offering an explicit example of the way in which this language of multiculturalism is leveraged by the well-being university in service of higher education marketing agendas, the University of Richmond writes,

Colleges have long been at the forefront of studying critical social issues — like diversity and sustainability — and responding in ways that create lasting change. Now, the University of Richmond is on the forefront of colleges exploring modern approaches to health and well-being.³⁵⁷

In this way, not only is “diversity” framed as a pinnacle social issue in place of the interlocking systems of oppression that produce spaces that are inaccessible and hostile for many, but well-being is also framed alongside this issue as of equal importance and, it can be inferred, as somehow separate from these systemic conditions. Not to mention, this marketing language neglects to recognize the role that higher education has played in furthering oppressive projects throughout history.³⁵⁸ All the while, this aspirational and highly marketable language of pioneering innovation on the forefront of change likely serves as motivation to draw in more business from student consumers.

356. The use of the word “uplifting” here is drawn from Smith and Mayorga-Gallo, “New Principle-Policy Gap,” 891.

357. University of Richmond, “Creating a Culture,” 2.

358. Cannella and Coro-Ljungberg, “Neoliberalism in Higher Education,” 157; See Mustafa, “Mapping Violence, Naming Life” for a critical historical analysis of the ways in which higher education is rooted in anti-Black racism and oppression.

The prevalence of neoliberal multiculturalism at the well-being university readily lends itself to the co-optation of broader liberatory agendas in ways that still rely on the very systems of oppression that the logic of multiculturalism claims to address.³⁵⁹ On this theme, Gregory Bourassa writes,

While capitalism now presents the free market as a social justice solution to ameliorate racial inequalities, this official antiracism of neoliberal multiculturalism is still fundamentally reliant on the logics of white supremacy and settler colonialism.³⁶⁰

I argue that this phenomenon is noticeable at the well-being university in the wake of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests in response to the police killing of George Floyd, which inspired increased attention, in spaces that were formerly complacent, to the violence of systemic racism.³⁶¹ At the well-being university, this takes the form of a superficial co-optation of the language of anti-racism, which I argue is an emergent trend in need of critical analysis moving forward.

Exemplifying this trend, some higher education well-being initiatives have created supplementary programming targeted specifically at students of color. For instance, Dartmouth College added a “Racial Justice and Well-Being” page to its Student

359. Bourassa, “Neoliberal Multiculturalism,” 258.

360. Bourassa, 258-259. Bourassa also discusses the nuanced relationship between neoliberalism and multiculturalism, arguing that it can be read in two ways: one involves a recognition of neoliberalism’s adeptness at appropriating the language of multiculturalism, and the other requires a more complex reading that acknowledges how neoliberalism and multiculturalism have developed alongside each other in interdependent ways.

361. Brownhill, “Emancipatory Politics of Anti-Racism,” 10-13.

Wellness Center website and Wellesley College now includes a “Multicultural Resources and Support” page, which focuses specifically on “centering Black, Indigenous and People of Color’s (BIPOC) voices,” alongside its Student Wellness resources.³⁶²

Additionally, George Mason University’s Center for the Advancement of Well-Being highlights its new “Well-Being for the People Series,” linking it to the university’s “Black Lives Matter website.” About this program, George Mason University writes,

The Well-Being for the People Series is not your average well-being initiative. We are dedicated to centering BIPOC needs and resources. If you identify as a person of color, we welcome you into these spaces that are intended to acknowledge and support your unique well-being.³⁶³

By positioning these “multicultural” resources for students of color as separate facets of its well-being programming, and by using language like “not your average well-being initiative,” the well-being university uncritically signals a supposed commitment to anti-racism while also revealing that students of color are not taken into meaningful consideration in well-being initiatives as a whole – the “we” who is inviting students of color into well-being university spaces seems to point to the fact that these spaces are coded as white spaces to begin with – and that the creation of supplemental, “diverse” resources is somehow an adequate way to dismantle institutional racism deeply embedded in the well-being university.

362. Dartmouth College, “Racial Justice & Wellbeing”; Wellesley College, “Multicultural Resources.”

363. George Mason University, “Well-Being for the People.”

Additionally, some higher education well-being initiatives more explicitly apply the language of anti-racism. Wellesley University demonstrates this when it writes, Wellness, like so many aspects of our lives, is inextricably informed by intersectional identities. The marginalization and racial injustice of people of color affects numerous health disparities, and as such racism is a public health issue we must confront.

We firmly believe that centering Black, Indigenous and People of Color's (BIPOC) voices is central to creating safe and inclusive healthcare. We know that the work of racial justice requires a steadfast approach, and caring for ourselves to prevent burnout and maintain momentum is indeed a revolutionary act.³⁶⁴

Wellesley College then appropriates the language of Audre Lorde, who writes about "caring for [herself]" as an "act of political warfare."³⁶⁵ Similarly, Dartmouth College writes,

Our wellness center team is actively working to better understand the connection between systemic racism and wellness inequities. We are examining our own work with a critical lens and are committed to offering an anti-racist articulation of wellbeing for Dartmouth.³⁶⁶

Meanwhile, the University of Virginia includes "systemic racism," "anti-racism" and "how to be a better ally" in a list of "Google Search Suggestions" on a page of its Student

364. Wellesley College, "Multicultural Resources."

365. Wellesley College; Lorde, *Burst of Light*, 125.

366. Dartmouth College, "Racial Justice & Wellbeing."

Health and Wellness program.³⁶⁷ These examples represent the breadth of applications of the language of anti-racism at the well-being university, some more meaningful than others.

Clearly, it is crucial and nonnegotiable that racism is addressed and dismantled in all corners of higher education. However, if the language of anti-racist liberation movements is used without a critical engagement with the transformative action and structural change that those liberatory goals require, it becomes a blatant example of co-optation by the well-being university. As this trend emerges in higher education, where the language of anti-racism is co-opted into the well-being university's framework of neoliberal multiculturalism, I argue that further critical analysis is necessary to consider the nuances of this developing phenomenon. Particularly, further inquiry should pay attention to the ways in which this language continues to manifest in higher education well-being initiatives and what kinds of structural change, if any, emerge out of it.

In considering the future of the well-being university, it is important to emphasize that “multicultural” attempts to embrace more people into the fold of higher education well-being discourse ultimately does nothing to address the harmful framework of well-being I have critiqued here at length. As long as well-being is framed by interlocking systems of neoliberalism and ableism, no amount of “inclusivity” will make the well-being university a liberatory space for all people. In fact, I argue that the concept of “well-being” itself has been made incompatible with any truly liberatory potential by the very nature of its deep embeddedness in neoliberal and ableist ideologies (and the racism,

367. University of Virginia, “Community Resilience.”

classism and fatphobia with which they are intertwined). For that reason, I argue that there is a need for a new framework of liberation and collective care that exists outside of the language of “well-being” and that is resistant to neoliberal and ableist co-optation and their impulses toward individualism. In the concluding section that follows, I propose that a feminist ethics of care, conjoined with a structural political analysis of oppression, resistance and liberation, is one meaningful alternative that has transformational potential in this way.

Conclusion: Toward a Feminist Ethics of Care

As I have explored, “well-being” is not functioning as an effective framework of care in higher education due to its entrenchment in and co-optation by neoliberal and ableist hegemonies. Instead of gesturing toward collective liberation or the facilitation of meaningful relations of care, which might imply a positive, transformational outcome akin to, but innately distinct from, that imagined by the well-being university, it mirrors neoliberal and ableist goals of individual responsabilization, self-optimization, independence and conformity to a broad range of normative expectations of being. For this reason, an alternative framework of care is necessary. In place of a continued expansion of neoliberal “well-being,” I argue for an embrace of feminist care ethics, conjoined with a conception of care rooted in a tradition of Black feminist political analysis that is attentive to oppression, resistance and liberation. Together, these radical

conceptualizations of care have the potential to resist the violence of neoliberal, ableist individualism and its disparaging of fundamental human interdependence.³⁶⁸

In contrast to neoliberal well-being discourse, a shift toward feminist care ethics would facilitate a recognition of the ways in which people are relational beings embedded in relations of care.³⁶⁹ Beyond solely embracing an abstract “disposition” of care, feminist care ethics also critically attends to the ongoing action of care and of being in caring relation with others.³⁷⁰ In this way, higher education might embrace what Miriam Ticktin calls the “feminist commons,” which she outlines as a materially redistributive, “horizontal form of sociality” concerned not only with individuals but with a collective whose liberation and experience of care (terms I use here in place of “well-being”) are intertwined.³⁷¹

In elucidating this feminist commons, Ticktin highlights that we must acknowledge “our porousness” and accept “that we must fight for the well-being of everyone if we are to be healthy ourselves” (“healthy” is used here in reference to the COVID-19 pandemic).³⁷² This seems aligned with Virginia Held’s understanding of care, which includes an acknowledgement that “carers act [on] behalf of others’ interests, but they also care for themselves, since without the maintenance of their own capabilities,

368. Held, *Ethics of Care*, 14; Davy, “Ethic of Care,” 101-105; Garland-Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*, 101.

369. Held, *Ethics of Care*, 119.

370. Branicki, “COVID-19, Ethics of Care,” 7.

371. Ticktin, “Building a Feminist Commons.”

372. Ticktin.

they will not be able to continue to engage in care.”³⁷³ Relatedly, Audre Lorde writes, “caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”³⁷⁴ Lorde’s notion of self-care, rooted in a radical, Black feminist understanding of care, seems to point not to the neoliberal tendency toward self-optimization and individual responsibility, but rather to its role as an element of resistance in a society not designed to support people through the redistributive, “horizontal forms of sociality” outlined by Ticktin.³⁷⁵ It is important, then, to acknowledge these notions of care as they pertain to individuals’ ongoing engagement in relations of care and resistance to oppressive systems, even while attempting to turn toward a discourse of collective interdependence and care. This is because they point to the nuance of living in structurally violent conditions while necessarily engaging in community care and resistance.

Of course, this element of care has the potential to be troublingly appropriated by neoliberalism and ableism if severed from the collective, redistributive, relational feminist care ethics in which it is embedded. This is especially true if feminist care ethics is not conjoined with a critical political analysis of oppression, resistance and liberation. In the context of higher education, this raises a question of whether it is appropriate for the well-being university to encourage individuals to care for themselves in the sense implied by Held and Lorde – that is, as they engage in care for others and in the

373. Held, *Ethics of Care*, 31.

374. Lorde, *Burst of Light*, 125.

375. Lorde, *Burst of Light*, 125; Ticktin, “Building a Feminist Commons.”

challenging of oppressive systems – or if the resources allocated to the well-being university should instead be redistributed in ways that would materially support students, faculty and staff in caring for each other and/or toward envisioning an alternative approach to care in higher education that would require a significant structural transformation. I am inclined to argue that, due to the well-being university's entrenchment in neoliberal and ableist hegemonies, it cannot adequately address the nuance necessary for a meaningful embrace of a feminist care ethics and political analysis that concerns itself with individuals in relations of care and in broader ideas of care that, as Held writes,

[...] extend well beyond the sorts of caring that takes place in families and among friends, or even in the care institutions of the welfare state, to the social ties that bind groups together, to the bonds on which political and social institutions can be built, and even to the global concerns that citizens of the world can share.³⁷⁶

I argue that the well-being university's approach to well-being cannot adequately accommodate this conversation, or even closely approximate its goals, and therefore should be replaced by a more expansive embrace of feminist care ethics, conjoined with a political analysis of oppression, resistance and liberation, throughout institutions of higher education and beyond. Future inquiry should consider what spaces of resistance could look like on higher education campuses that embrace a feminist ethics of care outside of the well-being university and that might serve as alternative models of care in this context.

376. Held, *Ethics of Care*, 31.

The challenges posed by the well-being university are symptomatic of violent systems of oppression that reach far beyond higher education's ivory tower. Well-being initiatives are certainly not the origin of these interlocking systems – namely, neoliberalism and ableism – yet nonetheless uphold their values under a guise of quasi-uplifting “well-being” rhetoric. It is evident after extensive analysis of this discourse in higher education, that “well-being” has largely been conceptualized and enacted along normative lines incongruent with collective liberation and care. I argue that the institutional focus on this version of well-being ultimately distracts from and hinders a meaningful embrace of feminist care ethics and critical political analysis that could enable a deeper and broader experience of collective “flourishing.” Rather than continuing to reify the ableist, neoliberal status quo via the language of well-being, higher education should instead leverage its resources toward the envisioning of a world in which all people are fundamentally connected in networks of care that do not facilitate individualism and the othering of an expansive spectrum of ways of being. I mean this not in a utopian sense, but rather in one grounded in a recognition of the material conditions of the present, which are shaped by severe inequity and oppressive power relations, and also in a commitment to social/political/economic transformation and a recognition of the profound potential that an embrace of human interrelationality and interdependence could enable. In order to imagine these possibilities in the context of higher education, we must first shift away from neoliberal well-being discourse as a frame of reference for care. That, I argue, is a crucial next step in the ongoing work of liberatory, structural transformation, which itself is a necessary form of care.

APPENDIX A

Table 1: Higher Education Institution Details

Institution Name	Classifications
Alverno College	Private, liberal arts, women's
Barnard College	Private, liberal arts, women's
Bay Path University	Private, women's
Bennett College	Private, HBCU, women's
Cankdeska Cikana Community College	Public, tribal, land-grant, community
Cleveland State University	Public, research
College of Menominee Nation	Private, tribal, land-grant, community
College of St. Scholastica	Private
Colorado State University	Public, lang-grant, research
Columbia University	Private, Ivy League, research
Dartmouth College	Private, Ivy League, research
Diné College	Public, tribal, land-grant
Eastern Tennessee State University	Public, research
Fisk University	Private, HBCU
Florida A&M University	Public, lang-grant, HBCU
George Mason University	Public, research
Georgia Tech	Public, research
Hampton University	Private, research, HBCU

Harvard University	Private, Ivy League, research
Hendrix College	Private, liberal arts
Howard University	Private, HBCU
Ilisagvik College	Public, tribal, land-grant, community
Knoxville College	Private, HBCU
Lane College	Private, HBCU, Christian
Leech Lake Tribal College	Public, tribal, land-grant, community
LeMoyne-Owen College	Private, HBCU
Liberty University	Private
Luther College	Private, liberal arts
Meharry Medical College	Private, HBCU, medical
Mercy College	Private
Morehouse College	Private, men's, HBCU
Mount Holyoke College	Private, liberal arts, women's
Navajo Technical University	Public, tribal, land-grant
Northwest Indian College	Public, tribal, land-grant, community
Oglala Lakota College	Public, tribal, land-grant
Rice University	Private, research
Salem College	Private, liberal arts, women's
Scripps College	Private, liberal arts, women's
Seattle Pacific University	Private
Southwestern Indian Polytechnic Institute	Public, tribal, land-grant, community
Spelman College	Private, liberal arts, HBCU, women's
Tennessee State University	Public, HBCU, land-grant

Texas Woman's University	Public, research
University of Alabama	Public, research
University of California, Berkeley	Public, research
University of Chicago	Private, research
University of Maryland	Public, research
University of Michigan	Public, research
University of Richmond	Private, liberal arts
University of Texas at Austin	Public, research
University of Texas at San Antonio	Public, research
University of Virginia	Public, research
University of Minnesota	Public, research
Vanderbilt University	Private, research
Wake Forest University	Private, research, liberal arts
Wellesley College	Private, liberal arts, women's
Wesleyan College	Private, liberal arts, women's
Wind River Tribal College	Tribal, tribally chartered
Xavier University of Louisiana	Private, HBCU
Yale University	Private, Ivy League, research

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