

**Exploring Undergraduate Educators' Preparedness in Addressing Students' Overall Well-Being in a Post-Secondary Online Environment: A Qualitative Case Study**

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## **Abstract**

Declining student well-being in online higher education presents a significant challenge for institutions seeking to improve engagement, persistence, and academic success. Although faculty often recognize the importance of supporting students' social, emotional, and mental health needs, many report feeling underprepared to address well-being concerns in virtual learning environments. This dissertation in practice examined how full-time undergraduate educators perceive their preparedness to support students' overall well-being in an online setting. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore the preparedness and experiences of full-time undergraduate educators in addressing students' well-being in online learning environments. The study was guided by the PERMA model of well-being (Seligman, 2011), which emphasizes positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment as foundational elements of human flourishing. The research was conducted at a private university in the western United States serving primarily online undergraduate students. Seventeen educators completed an open-ended questionnaire, and eleven participated in follow-up semi-structured interviews. Data were analyzed using thematic coding, including open coding, category development, and theme synthesis across data sources to support triangulation. Findings revealed that faculty conceptualized preparedness primarily through relational practices such as building trust, maintaining presence, and fostering psychological safety. Participants described confidence as developing largely through experience and informal learning rather than structured professional development. Ambiguity regarding institutional expectations and limited clarity about referral processes contributed to variability in faculty confidence and response approaches. Faculty also emphasized the importance of understanding students as whole adult learners whose broader life responsibilities influence academic engagement. The findings also

suggest that institutions should align professional development, instructional policies, and institutional messaging to reinforce relational teaching practices, clarify faculty roles, and promote consistent support structures. By intentionally integrating well-being support into everyday instructional practice, institutions can strengthen faculty preparedness and enhance student engagement and persistence in online higher education.

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## Table of Contents

Section 1: Foundation .....	1
Statement of the Problem.....	7
Purpose of the Study .....	8
Research Questions .....	13
Conceptual Framework.....	13
Review of the Literature .....	24
Ethical Assurances .....	57
Summary .....	61
Section 2: Methodology and Design.....	64
Design and Method.....	64
Population and Sample .....	74
Instrumentation .....	75
Data Collection and Analysis.....	78
Assumptions.....	80
Limitations .....	82
Delimitations.....	83
Summary .....	85
Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations.....	87
Findings.....	93
Evaluation of the Outcomes.....	133
Implications and Recommendations for Practice .....	144
Recommendations for Future Research .....	151
Conclusions.....	154
References.....	159
Appendix A Questionnaire Questions Alignment Matrix .....	171
Appendix B Semi-Structured Interview Questions Alignment Matrix.....	173
Appendix C Field Testing Invitation Script.....	176
Appendix D Field Testing Background Information .....	178
Appendix E Draft Instrumentation for Field Testing.....	179
Appendix F Rubric for Instrumentation Evaluation .....	183
Appendix G Open-Ended Questionnaire Code, Category, and Theme Tables.....	184
Appendix H Semi-Structured Interview Code, Category, and Theme Tables.....	187

## List of Tables

Table 1 <i>Description of Participants</i> .....	92
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## Section 1: Foundation

Well-being is a multidimensional concept that encompasses the physical, social, emotional, and mental health aspects of an individual's life. Rooted in psychological and health sciences, as well as aligning with Seligman's (2011) Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishments/Achievements (PERMA) model, well-being often refers to a state of positive functioning, reflecting the extent to which individuals perceive their lives and actions as meaningful, purposeful, and fulfilling. This term not only includes the absence of physical, mental, and emotional illness but also emphasizes an integrated approach to health, involving a mix of social connections, emotional resilience, and mental stability. Another well-being construct in the literature is the concept of flourishing, which Seligman (2011) defined as a state where individuals experience positive emotions, engage in meaningful activities (leading to accomplishments and achievements), and cultivate positive relationships. These interconnected domains shape an individual's capacity to navigate life's challenges effectively and thrive in personal and professional environments (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Ray et al., 2024). For the purposes of this study, the term "well-being" refers to an individual's social, emotional, and mental health collectively, acknowledging their integral role in supporting student success in online learning contexts.

Undergraduate students face increasing challenges to their well-being, with declines in social, emotional, and mental health becoming widespread across higher education. Bruffaerts et al. (2018) suggested factors such as academic pressure, financial stress, and shifting social dynamics contribute to these struggles with well-being, often manifesting as anxiety, depression, and feelings of isolation. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these issues, introducing disruptions to traditional support systems, such as peers and counselors, and amplifying

stressors, such as economic uncertainty and health concerns (Jarrah, 2024). Declines in well-being not only hinder students' academic performance but can also contribute to increases in dropout rates and impair students' overall ability to engage in meaningful educational experiences (Wagner et al., 2024).

These declines in student well-being are becoming more prevalent in online higher education than ever before, which is important because it is a strong contributing factor to online students experiencing heightened feelings of isolation and reduced access to supportive campus resources. Allen et al. (2020) found a sense of belonging as a subjective feeling of deep connection to social groups and environments that depends on opportunities for interaction with others. Similarly, Allen et al. (2020) suggested that although belongingness can be influenced by various daily events and stressors, an overall sense of belonging reduces feelings of isolation and is a fundamental need that predicts numerous psychological, physical, and social outcomes. This sense of belonging not only fosters positive social relationships and academic achievement but also enhances overall well-being by mitigating stress and promoting better mental and physical health. Often, online environments can contribute to students' emotional and mental health struggles by diminishing those opportunities for social engagement and creating additional stressors related to self-discipline and technology use (Jarrah, 2024). Petillion and McNeil (2020) found 85% of interview participants described experiencing some form of stress, fear, or anxiety associated with their online learning experiences. And, research has shown that nearly 59% of online learners admitted they have limited knowledge of available mental health services and nearly 55% say their institution lacks the mental health services to meet the needs of online students (Gay & Barth, 2024). Further research has shown that addressing students' feelings of disconnection and limited access to mental health services are critical to fostering resilience and

mitigating the negative effects of stress (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). These challenges are compounded by the lack of face-to-face interactions, which increases the psychological and communicative gap between students and instructors, making it more difficult for students to build a sense of community, feel socially connected, and seek timely help from peers or faculty. As the level of transactional distance rises, students often experience greater ambiguity, decreased motivation, and diminished opportunities for dialogue and immediate feedback, all of which can hinder their ability to engage meaningfully in the learning process and access the support they need (Moore, 1993). These factors clearly illustrate how the unique challenges of online learning environments contribute to a decline in student well-being compared to traditional face-to-face settings.

Declines in well-being not only have a negative impact on academic outcomes but also challenge educators and institutions in providing effective support for online learners, further highlighting the importance of addressing this issue. Students experiencing declines in well-being are seven times more likely to face academic challenges such as lower grades, incomplete coursework, and eventual withdrawal from school altogether (Wagner et al., 2024). As a result, each of these challenges can have a negative impact on their educational trajectories, as well as institutional retention rates (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). Addressing these issues is essential to not only improving the learner's experience, as well as overall academic success, but also fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment prioritizing the holistic well-being of online learners.

Despite the call to support the well-being of online students, faculty often feel ill-prepared to do so. In fact, educators report lacking the training and resources necessary to address students' social, emotional, and mental health needs effectively (Constantinou et al.,

2022; Gulliver et al., 2018). A survey conducted by Gulliver et al. (2018) revealed nearly 60% of university faculty felt they were insufficiently informed to respond appropriately to students facing mental health challenges. Furthermore, less than 12% of respondents reported receiving formal training on how to address student well-being, highlighting significant gaps in institutional support, faculty training, and preparedness to appropriately address student needs. These gaps often leave educators under-equipped to engage with students facing complex challenges, particularly in the absence of clear institutional policies and support frameworks.

When faculty are not trained to support students' well-being, the consequences can be detrimental to both individual students and the broader institutional environment. Unaddressed declines in students' social, emotional, and mental health are strongly associated with decreased academic performance, disengagement, and higher attrition rates among students (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2024). For example, students experiencing challenges with well-being may struggle to meet academic demands, leading to incomplete coursework, lower grades, and potentially withdrawal from their programs (Wagner et al., 2024; Kaya & Erdem, 2021). This attrition not only disrupts students' educational trajectories but also negatively impacts institutional retention metrics (American Institutes, 2012). Additionally, high attrition rates can lead to decreased tuition revenue, which is a primary income source for many institutions, thereby straining financial resources and potentially leading to budget cuts or program reductions (Kelchen & Pingel, 2024). When faculty are not equipped to support students' well-being, it can contribute to decreased academic performance, disengagement, and higher attrition rates, which not only disrupt students' educational progress but also negatively impact institutional retention, financial stability, and overall sustainability. Furthermore, persistently high attrition rates may

draw increased scrutiny from accrediting bodies, potentially jeopardizing the institution's accreditation status and overall reputation.

Despite growing awareness of declining student well-being, particularly among undergraduate students in online educational environments, a significant gap exists in the literature regarding the preparedness of faculty and staff in online higher education environments to support students' social, emotional, and mental well-being. While prior studies have explored general mental health challenges in higher education (e.g., Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Stallman, 2010) and the need for faculty training (e.g., Constantinou et al., 2022; Gulliver et al., 2019), in an effort to create better student experiences and enhanced learning outcomes, more research is needed examining the experiences and preparedness of educators in online settings in supporting students' overall well-being. Gaining insight into faculty experiences and perceptions is particularly crucial for online educators, as the distinctive features of online learning environments can present additional challenges in recognizing and addressing students' well-being needs (Ray et al., 2024). Further, more exploratory research could assist in developing even more effective strategies and skills to address students' well-being needs and how current training programs effectively address these strategies.

To address this call, there is a movement across the higher education sector toward implementing more comprehensive well-being strategies within institutions. This sector-wide initiative aims to systematically and holistically enhance practices to embed mental well-being into the curriculum, responding to the challenges of student mental health in higher education. Research by Travia et al. (2022) suggests this movement involves more systematic, environmental approaches to well-being, including structural, organizational, and financial strategies, as well as policy initiatives. One such case is a west coast United States private

institution, serving nearly 30,000 primarily online students, which has responded to the growing need for attention to student well-being by adopting a holistic approach to student support, success, and well-being through its “whole human education” framework. This initiative attempts to integrate academic support with resources aimed at fostering social, emotional, and mental health, with the goal of helping students receive comprehensive care that aligns with their diverse needs. While these efforts demonstrate the institution’s commitment to addressing well-being on a systemic level, a gap remains in the literature as to how faculty perceive their preparedness to support students’ well-being within this framework. Faculty are pivotal in implementing these holistic well-being initiatives. One study finding suggested faculty are trusted “leaders of their students’ learning” and are in a position where they can impact the well-being of the students within their learning environment (Porter et al., 2025). Administrative and academic leaders play a critical role in encouraging faculty to engage in addressing this gap, thereby bridging institutional strategies with the practical realities educators face in effectively supporting students.

Exploring faculty experiences and effective strategies to support students’ well-being holds significant implications for various stakeholders in higher education, particularly faculty, staff, and institutional leaders. By investigating educators' preparedness to address students' well-being in online environments, the findings can inform the development of targeted training programs and resources designed to equip faculty with the necessary skills and confidence to support students effectively. Building on these findings, institutions may enhance their ability to better allocate resources that directly address student well-being, particularly as they gain a clearer understanding of its impact on student persistence and success. Additionally, integrating well-being support skills into faculty hiring criteria or requiring professional development

certifications could ensure that educators are adequately prepared to foster a supportive learning environment. By embedding these competencies into institutional policies, universities could create a more proactive and sustainable approach to student well-being in online education. For staff and institutional leaders, this study provides valuable insights into the structural and policy-level changes required to foster an inclusive and supportive educational framework. Ultimately, enhancing faculty preparedness to support student well-being may improve retention, academic performance, and the development of a more cohesive online learning community, benefiting not only students but also the wider academic community.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The problem addressed in this study is that while faculty and staff often recognize the importance of supporting student well-being, many reported feeling unprepared to effectively identify and address these student needs (Constantinou et al., 2022), which can impede their ability to support well-being among their students (Ray et al., 2024). In a study exploring the training of university teaching staff and their preparedness to address students' well-being effectively, Gulliver et al. (2018) found approximately 60% of post-secondary educators reported feeling ill-prepared to recognize and address students' well-being concerns in online environments. Gulliver et al. also found while 82.2% of educators reported "moderate confidence" in providing emotional support for students, 49.6% indicated they did not have access to formal training or explicit guidelines on when, how, and where to refer students for further assistance. This perceived lack of knowledge led to 60% of educators surveyed feeling under-equipped to address student well-being concerns. Constantinou et al. (2022) found 73% of faculty and staff reported supporting the need for more targeted training to enhance their skills in supporting student mental health and 61% thought training should be mandatory for all faculty

members. This issue worsens as additional research indicates well-being concerns among post-secondary students are “especially prevalent among online learners.” (Jarrah, 2024, p. 3612) and “clearly associated with lower academic functioning” (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). If this problem persists, students' social and emotional needs may go unrecognized and unaddressed, which could lead to decreased academic performance and increased dropout rates (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Wagner et al., 2024).

Despite increasing efforts by higher education institutions to address post-secondary student well-being, significant research gaps remain. One such gap is understanding undergraduate post-secondary online educators' preparedness to support students' well-being and their experiences with the training they receive (Garcia-Chitiva & Correa, 2024; Suwanwong et al., 2024). Additional research is needed to identify effective strategies and training programs that address students' social, emotional, and mental health needs (Condra et al., 2015). However, the effectiveness of these strategies may vary depending on the specific learning context, highlighting the importance of tailoring interventions to meet the unique needs of each educational environment.

### **Purpose of the Study**

In a university setting where resources are distributed across degree levels, ranging from associate to doctoral programs, undergraduate students often have distinct well-being needs that require targeted support. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore the preparedness and experiences of full-time undergraduate educators in addressing students' overall well-being in online learning environments and to identify effective strategies and skills to address students' well-being needs. The target population for this study included approximately ninety full-time educators, specializing in teaching at the undergraduate level,

across a variety of disciplines, at a private institution of higher education in the western United States. The target population was appropriate to address the research questions because this population has experience teaching in fully online or hybrid formats and may have encountered challenges or implemented strategies to address students' well-being needs within the context of online learning.

Purposive sampling was used for this study to select participants with specific experiences and expertise relevant to the research questions. Purposive sampling is particularly well-suited for qualitative exploratory case study research as it allows the researcher to focus on individuals who can provide rich, detailed, and contextually relevant data about the phenomenon under study (Patton, 2015; Yin, 2018), which in this case is the preparedness and experiences in addressing students' well-being in online learning environments. By targeting participants with relevant experience and expertise, this study aligned with these recommendations to produce findings that are both insightful and applicable to the context of online education and student well-being.

In qualitative research, the sample size is determined by the study's purpose, design, and the principle of data saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggested there is no magic number for a sample group, but proposed what is needed is "an adequate number of participants...to answer the question posed" in the purpose statement (p. 101). Lincoln and Guba (1985) recommended sampling until a point of saturation or redundancy is reached. Similarly, Yin (2018) contended 8-15 participants is sufficient for a case study as long as they provide comprehensive and diverse insights into the phenomenon. Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) suggested data saturation, when no new themes or insights emerge from

additional data, can typically be achieved with twelve participants, although fewer participants may suffice in narrowly focused studies, such as single case studies.

Based on recommendations for the literature, for this qualitative exploratory single case study, the intended sample size was 10 to 15 participants. This range was appropriate as it would provide enough depth and diversity of experience to achieve saturation while maintaining a focus on the case's bounded system. The final sample included 17 questionnaire participants and 11 interview participants. Guest et al. (2020) defined saturation as the point in data collection when no new information or themes emerge from additional data, indicating the sample size is sufficient to comprehensively understand the research phenomenon. Additionally, this sample size allowed for rich, detailed data collection through semi-structured interviews and open-ended questionnaires without becoming overwhelming to analyze. Finally, as this study sought to explore educators' preparedness, experiences, and strategies in addressing student well-being, a smaller, targeted sample ensured the depth and nuance of individual perspectives are captured. Recruitment continued until saturation was achieved.

To ensure the collection of relevant and meaningful data, the eligibility for this study included three main criteria. First, participants were required to be employed as a full-time undergraduate educator (i.e., 40+ hours per week) at the study site. Secondly, participants were required to have held full-time employment at the study site for a minimum of two years. And, thirdly, participants were required to have taught in a fully online or hybrid format at the undergraduate level. This criterion ensured participants' experiences and perspectives were relevant to the phenomenon being studied, as they were all subject to the same mission, vision, and training provided by the university. These eligibility criteria were designed to ensure the study included participants who could provide in-depth, contextually relevant insights into the

preparedness and experiences of full-time undergraduate educators in addressing students' well-being needs in online learning environments.

The recruitment plan for this study was designed to identify and engage qualified participants who met the eligibility criteria. Prior to data collection, the primary researcher requested site permission approval from the Provost. After permission was received, additional approval was sought from the National University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the ethical protection of human subjects involved in the study. The IRB application included detailed descriptions of the study's purpose, participant recruitment procedures, data collection instruments, informed consent process, and data protection measures. Recruitment began only after formal IRB approval was obtained. Participants were recruited through a multi-step process. First, the researcher reached out to each school and college's Manager of Dean Support (MOD) and asked for a list of faculty names and email addresses. Additionally, the researcher copied each Dean on this email request, so they were fully aware of the study occurring within their schools and colleges. Then, the researcher used that list to reach out to faculty individually, using the recruitment letter, to inquire about their willingness to be involved in the study. This letter introduced the study, described the eligibility criteria, and included a link to access the informed consent form and initial online questionnaire.

Once the direct link was clicked, each volunteer participant was provided with an informed consent form that outlines this study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and confidentiality measures. The form also outlined that recruitment and study participation would adhere to ethical research guidelines, including voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the assurance of confidentiality. Participants were required to sign the consent form electronically (by clicking their consent) before data collection began. If an individual

clicked that they did not consent, the individual was thanked and exited from the form. If consent was provided, participants were then moved forward to the online questionnaire via a secure survey platform (e.g., Qualtrics). The first three questions collected relevant demographic information, such as current employment status, years teaching at the study site, and the type of courses they teach as a means of confirming eligibility to participate in the study. These questions provided a portrait to better understand who the participants were, as well as verify their eligibility to participate in this study. If, however, the prospective participant answers “no” to any of the first three questions, they were deemed to be not eligible to participate in the study. As a result, they were thanked and exited from the questionnaire.

The questionnaire also included open-ended questions as the first data collection method toward triangulation. These open-ended questions aligned with the research questions. At the end of the open-ended questionnaire, respondents were given the option to schedule a semi-structured interview with the researcher, via the online scheduling platform Calendly. A link to the scheduling platform was provided. This recruitment plan was designed to ensure the recruitment of knowledgeable participants who met this study’s eligibility criteria adhered to ethical research practices. An incentive was used to promote participation in this study. An incentive is defined by Rowhani-Farid et al. (2017) as “a benefit, reward, or cost that motivates an action” (p. 2). Each qualified participant who signed the informed consent, completed the initial questionnaire, and took part in the interview was entered into a drawing to win one of two \$50 Amazon gift cards.

This study was significant because it provided insights into how full-time undergraduate educators can better address students' well-being needs in online learning environments, an increasingly critical area as online education continues to expand. By identifying effective

strategies and skills, the findings can inform professional development programs and institutional policies to enhance educators' preparedness for supporting student well-being. Ultimately, this research contributed to fostering more inclusive, supportive, and engaging online learning experiences, improving student success and retention in higher education.

## **Research Questions**

### ***RQ1***

How do full-time undergraduate faculty in post-secondary online educational environments at a private university describe supporting student overall well-being?

### ***RQ2***

How do full-time undergraduate educators in post-secondary online educational environments at a private university describe their preparedness to support students' overall well-being?

### ***RQ3***

What training do full-time undergraduate educators in post-secondary online educational environments at a private university identify as critical toward their preparedness to support the overall well-being of students?

## **Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this study was Seligman's (2011) Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment (PERMA) Model of Well-Being, which provided a comprehensive lens for understanding and enhancing human flourishing. This model, developed within positive psychology, identifies five core elements essential to well-being: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. By applying the PERMA model, this study examined how full-time online educators addressed and

fostered these elements to support students' well-being and engagement in online learning environments. The PERMA model offered a robust lens for exploring the holistic needs of students in online learning environments by examining how educators support well-being, using practices and strategies supported by the university through training or professional development opportunities. This approach aligned with the growing recognition that student well-being is not ancillary to learning but integral to sustained engagement and achievement (Maya & Erdem, 2021). Using the components of the PERMA model to guide the development of the interview questions and address the research questions, this framework bridged the gap between theoretical understanding and practical application, as well as offered insights into how educators could support the well-being of their students. The findings from this study contribute to the broader discussion on fostering student well-being in educational contexts, particularly within the challenges and opportunities of digital learning.

The PERMA Model of Well-Being was introduced by Martin Seligman, a pioneering figure in the field of positive psychology, as part of an effort to shift psychology's focus from diagnosing and treating mental illness to understanding and fostering human well-being. Seligman, during his tenure as president of the American Psychological Association (APA) in 1998, challenged the field to explore what makes life worth living. Seligman advocated for studying positive traits, experiences, and institutions, laying the groundwork for positive psychology as a subfield. Rooted in the foundational principles of positive psychology, the PERMA model was first articulated in Seligman's book *Flourish* (2011), which expanded upon earlier frameworks of happiness and well-being. The PERMA model builds on Seligman's earlier work on happiness, particularly his Authentic Happiness Theory (2002), which categorized well-being into three dimensions: pleasure, engagement, and meaning. However, in

his 2011 book *Flourish*, Seligman later recognized that these dimensions were insufficient for capturing the complexity of well-being, prompting him to expand the framework. The result was the PERMA model, which added relationships and accomplishment as essential components, reflecting a more holistic understanding of well-being.

The PERMA model was developed through Seligman's synthesis of research across multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, and education. Each component of the model was carefully chosen based on empirical evidence and its independent contribution to well-being. The PERMA model represents a shift from viewing well-being as a singular construct (e.g., happiness) to a multidimensional concept (Seligman, 2011). The model's development was further shaped by longitudinal studies and interventions demonstrating the model's applicability across diverse cultures and populations, solidifying its foundation as a robust framework for understanding human well-being (Seligman, 2011).

In educational contexts, the PERMA model offers a lens for addressing not only academic success but also the holistic well-being of students. By emphasizing well-being as an integral part of learning, the model aligns well with student-centered education, which focuses on active learning, personalized instruction, and collaboration, particularly in environments like online learning, where challenges related to engagement and social connection can be exacerbated by modality. This context for the model highlights its roots in positive psychology and its evolution into a practical, multidimensional framework for fostering well-being, making it an appropriate foundation for examining educators' efforts to address student well-being in online learning environments.

As previously mentioned, the PERMA model of well-being identifies five core components essential for human flourishing, which Seligman (2011) defined as a state of optimal

well-being characterized by the presence of five key elements. Each component is distinct but interrelated, contributing to a holistic understanding of well-being. Below is a discussion of each component and its application to this study on the preparedness and strategies of post-secondary educators in addressing students' well-being in online learning environments.

Seligman (2011) said *positive emotion* is the “rock bottom” meaning of happiness and refers to what we feel as humans: pleasure, rapture, ecstasy, warmth, and comfort. These five elements are all interconnected aspects of positive emotion, as they each represent varying degrees of emotional uplift and psychological satisfaction that contribute to an individual's overall sense of happiness and well-being. As such, positive emotion is the cornerstone of well-being, as experiencing positive emotions enhances resilience and motivation. In online learning environments, fostering positive emotions is critical for both student success and engagement. The components of positive emotion from the PERMA model informed the development of the interview questions towards addressing the research questions.

Seligman (2011) said that *engagement* involves a commitment to people and our own self-care through deep involvement in activities, often leading to a state of "flow," where individuals are fully immersed and focused on life events. Engagement is crucial for achieving satisfaction and productivity. Online learning often presents challenges in maintaining students' engagement due to physical distance and technological barriers. The components of engagement from the PERMA model informed the development of the interview questions towards addressing the research questions.

According to Seligman (2011), *relationships* are what give meaning and purpose to life, leading to the development of relevant connections with others, which are vital for emotional support and a sense of belonging. Positive interpersonal interactions contribute significantly to

overall well-being (Seligman, 2011). For students, building strong relationships in an online setting can be challenging, but it is essential for preventing feelings of isolation. The components of relationships from the PERMA model informed the development of the interview questions towards addressing the research questions.

*Meaning* refers to finding purpose in life and consists of understanding one's activities as contributing to something greater than oneself (Seligman, 2011). Research indicates that students are more motivated and engaged when they find their learning content meaningful and relevant. Lo et al. (2022) demonstrated that helping students see the value in learning content through meaningful assignments significantly increased their motivation in higher education settings. As such, the components of meaning from the PERMA model informed the development of the interview questions towards addressing the research questions.

Seligman (2011) suggested that *accomplishment* involves achieving goals, mastering skills, and gaining a sense of competence and success, even when it brings no positive emotion. However, accomplishment does contribute to overall self-esteem and motivation (Seligman, 2011). Online education can sometimes lack clear opportunities for students to experience accomplishment due to limited interaction or delayed feedback. The components of accomplishment from the PERMA model informed the development of the interview questions towards addressing the research questions.

The PERMA model was used by this study to inform the development of the research question and was used to develop the individual open-ended questions and interview questions. In addition, the PERMA model was used by this study as a lens through which to view and understand the findings of this study. This study identified gaps and highlighted effective

practices that can be implemented to enhance student well-being, fostering environments that support both academic success and personal flourishing in virtual education contexts.

The PERMA model operates on the principle that well-being is not defined solely by one's happiness or achievement but by the integration of diverse elements that collectively support a fulfilling life. Seligman (2011) suggests a fulfilling life includes the presence of the five core elements of the PERMA model and is not just about fleeting happiness, but reflects a broader, more sustained sense of well-being and positive emotions. Positive emotions then provide the foundation for resilience (the ability to bounce back from adversity, trauma, or significant stress) and optimism (a mental attitude characterized by a hopeful outlook), while engagement focuses attention and fosters deep involvement in meaningful tasks (Seligman, 2011). Relationships form the social scaffolding necessary for emotional support and a sense of belonging. Meaning adds purpose and direction, linking individual activities to broader significance, and accomplishment ensures the satisfaction of achieving personal goals and mastering challenges. This interplay creates a synergistic effect where each tenet enhances the others. For example, strong relationships can increase positive emotions and provide the social capital necessary to accomplish goals, while a sense of meaning can drive deeper engagement and satisfaction in both academic and personal pursuits. Together, these components form a cohesive model that highlights the interconnected pathways to well-being.

In this study, the PERMA model served as a conceptual lens to explore how post-secondary educators address students' well-being in online learning environments. By applying this model broadly, this study examined not just isolated aspects of well-being, but the comprehensive strategies and approaches educators use to foster holistic well-being in their

students. The model provided a structured framework for analyzing how well-being is embedded within the teaching practices, support systems, and learning activities in online education.

The PERMA model aligns directly with the research questions guiding this study, as it provided a systematic way to explore: 1) how educators perceive their preparation to support student well-being across emotional, cognitive, and social dimensions (e.g., fostering positive emotions, building relationships); 2) what strategies educators use to engage students, create meaningful connections to course content, and promote a sense of accomplishment; and 3) how these interconnected elements of well-being influence students' engagement, satisfaction, and success in online learning environments. As such, the PERMA model allowed this study to move beyond surface-level inquiries and investigate the nuanced ways in which full-time undergraduate educators can support the well-being of their students. By examining the dynamic integration of the model's components, this research aimed to identify actionable insights that contribute to creating more supportive, engaging, and effective online learning environments, advancing both student well-being and academic success.

Empirical studies (such as Kern and Trask-Kerr) have increasingly utilized Seligman's PERMA model to explore well-being in educational contexts, particularly as institutions recognize the importance of addressing students' holistic needs to foster academic success and personal development. Researchers such as Kern et al. (2015) used the PERMA model to assess the well-being among university students and its relationship with academic engagement. Kern et al. (2015) found higher levels of well-being across the PERMA dimensions were positively associated with student motivation, participation, and persistence. By framing their study within the PERMA model, they were able to demonstrate how each dimension, particularly engagement and relationships, contributed to improved academic outcomes. Trask-Kerr et al. (2019)

investigated how educators' adoption of positive education teaching practices impacted students' experiences in the classroom. Using the PERMA model as a framework, they explored how educators fostered positive emotions, meaningful learning activities, and supportive relationships. Trask-Kerr et al. (2019) findings highlighted the critical role of teaching presence in promoting student well-being, especially in creating a sense of accomplishment and belonging. More recent studies, such as those by Lan and Saad (2024), have applied the PERMA model to examine well-being in online learning environments. Researchers found fostering positive relationships and engagement were particularly important in combating the isolation often experienced in virtual classrooms. They used the PERMA framework to interpret findings that emphasized the importance of integrating social and emotional support into the online learning experience.

These studies demonstrate the versatility of the PERMA model as a framework for understanding and enhancing well-being in education. By framing research questions and interpreting findings within the PERMA dimensions, researchers have been able to identify targeted strategies that promote holistic well-being and academic success (Lan & Saad, 2024; Trask-Kerr, 2019). Similarly, the PERMA model was used as a lens to explore how full-time undergraduate educators address students' well-being in online environments, building on existing research while addressing the unique challenges and opportunities in virtual education settings. This alignment ensures this study contributed meaningfully to the growing body of literature on well-being and education.

In designing this study, several alternative theoretical frameworks were considered for their potential relevance to exploring student well-being and engagement in online learning environments. These frameworks were ultimately not selected due to specific limitations or

misalignment with this study's objectives. Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1943) is a psychological theory that organizes human needs into five levels: physiological, safety, belongingness, esteem, and self-actualization. The Hierarchy emphasizes the importance of addressing basic needs as a foundation for achieving higher-level functioning. While Maslow's theory provides a foundational understanding of human needs, it was not selected because it focuses heavily on hierarchical progression rather than the interconnected nature of well-being dimensions. Additionally, its application to educational contexts can be limited, as it does not explicitly address constructs such as engagement or accomplishment, which are central to this study's exploration of student well-being.

Self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000) was also considered as SDT assumes that human motivation and well-being are driven by the fulfillment of three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Self-Determination Theory offers a robust lens for understanding motivation and engagement but focuses primarily on the individual's intrinsic psychological needs. While it overlaps with aspects of well-being, such as relationships and accomplishment, it did not provide a comprehensive framework that addressed positive emotions, meaning, or other dimensions crucial to the holistic exploration of well-being, which the PERMA model encompasses.

The Community of Inquiry framework (CoI) (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) was also considered as it emphasizes three core elements - social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence - as essential for meaningful learning experiences, particularly in online environments. Although the CoI framework is highly relevant to online education and provides valuable insights into fostering engagement and community, it is primarily focused on the learning process rather than the broader concept of well-being. This study's focus on holistic

well-being extends beyond the cognitive and social dimensions that the CoI framework addresses, making it less comprehensive than the PERMA model for this purpose.

The concept of antifragility, introduced by Taleb (2012), was also considered as a potential framework, as it describes how individuals and systems not only recover from stress but grow stronger because of challenges and adversity. In the context of online learning, antifragility could provide a lens for understanding how students and educators adapt to difficulties and develop resilience. However, this framework was not selected because it primarily focuses on adaptation to stressors rather than a broader, structured model of well-being. While resilience and adaptability are relevant to student success, antifragility does not comprehensively address elements such as positive relationships, accomplishment, or engagement, which are critical to a holistic exploration of student well-being.

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

***Attrition:*** Attrition is defined as the reduction in student numbers due to dropouts or withdrawals before completing a program (Wagner et al., 2024). Attrition is calculated mathematically as the percentage of individuals who leave a group over a specific period, using the following formula: number of departures, divided by initial population, then multiplied by one hundred.

***Full-Time Undergraduate Educators:*** For the sake of this study, full-time undergraduate educators are faculty members, who possess a master's degree or higher, and are hired at the university level to instruct undergraduate students full-time.

***Institutional Support:*** Institutional support refers to the resources and assistance provided by educational institutions to enhance students' affective, behavioral, and cognitive engagement in online and blended learning settings (Graham et al., 2023).

**Motivation:** Motivation, in the context of learning, is an internal trait used to arouse, direct, and maintain students' learning behaviors (Lo et al., 2022).

**Online Learning Environment:** The online learning environment consists of virtual/digital platforms and settings in which educational interactions occur, encompassing the instructional design and social dynamics that facilitate learning outside traditional face-to-face classrooms (Vo & Ho, 2024).

**Participation:** For the sake of this study, participation is referred to as a process of learning by taking part and maintaining relations with others. It is a complex process comprising doing, communicating, thinking, feeling and belonging, which occurs both online and offline (Hrastinski, 2008).

**Persistence:** Persistence is the tendency to remain engaged in specific goal-related activities, despite difficulties, obstacles, fatigue, prolonged frustration or low perceived feasibility (Constantin et al., 2012).

**Preparedness:** Preparedness involves proactive strategies (e.g., active, continuous, and anticipatory) aimed at minimizing the effects of unwanted occurrences and contingencies (Staupe-Delgado & Kruke, 2018).

**Postsecondary Education:** Postsecondary education is that which occurs after high school, including undergraduate and graduate programs (National Center for Education Statistics, 2002).

**Retention:** Retention is the ability of an institution to keep students enrolled through the completion of their studies (Tight, 2020).

**Retention Rates:** Retention rates are the number of students who continue to re-enroll in a program annually until completion (Wagner et al., 2024). Retention rates are calculated

mathematically as the percentage of individuals who remain in a group over a specific period, using the following formula: number of remaining individuals, divided by initial population, then multiplied by one hundred.

***Social and Emotional Needs:*** Social and emotional needs are factors related to interpersonal relationships and emotional resilience essential for well-being (Bailey et al., 2019).

***Well-being:*** Well-being is a multidimensional concept that encompasses the physical, social, emotional, and mental health aspects of an individual's life (Seligman, 2011).

## **Review of the Literature**

The problem addressed in this study was while faculty and staff recognize the importance of supporting student well-being, many reported feeling unprepared to effectively identify and address these student needs (Constantinou et al., 2022), which can impede their ability to support well-being among their students (Ray et al., 2024). The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore the preparedness and experiences of full-time undergraduate educators in addressing students' overall well-being in online learning environments and to identify effective strategies and skills to address students' well-being needs. The literature review is organized into seven themes, five of which have sub-themes. The themes are as follows: 1) *Defining and Describing the Concept of Well-Being*; 2) *Role of Well-Being in Student Engagement and Academic Success*; 3) *Declining Student Well-Being in Online Learning Environments*; 4) *Faculty's Role in Supporting Student Well-Being*; 5) *Faculty Preparedness and Institutional Support for Well-Being Initiatives*; 6) *Barriers to Faculty Engagement in Student Well-Being*; and 7) *Emerging Institutional Approaches to Well-Being in Online Learning*.

To conduct the scoping of the literature, a systematic approach was used to identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant peer-reviewed research on faculty preparedness, student well-

being, and online education. The search process utilized the databases ProQuest, EBSCOhost, and JSTOR, using the following key terms in the Boolean search: “student well-being”; “student wellness”; “student mental health”; “instructor wellness training”; “faculty support training”; “faculty preparedness in online learning” “student well-being in higher education”; “mental health support in online education”; and “professional development for faculty.” While conducting the literature search, the initial search criteria was set to include only peer-reviewed articles from 2019-2024. The incorporation of Boolean operators (e.g., AND, OR, NOT) helped narrow the search to reveal more appropriate articles. One search included the parameters, “virtual OR online OR remote”, and “faculty OR instructor”, and “student AND wellness OR well-being”, and “training OR education OR development OR learning”. Another search used the parameters, “virtual OR online OR remote”, and “faculty AND training OR education OR development OR learning”, and “student AND distress OR wellness OR mental health”, and “higher education OR college OR university OR post-secondary”. Preference was given to articles published between 2020 and 2025 to ensure the inclusion of contemporary research while also incorporating seminal works foundational to this study. Studies were selected based on their relevance to the research problem, theoretical alignment, and empirical contributions to the field. Particular attention was paid to research examining faculty experiences in online learning environments, the impact of student well-being on academic success, and institutional strategies for professional development in supporting overall student well-being. This scoping process ensured a comprehensive understanding of the current landscape of research, identified existing gaps, and provided a solid foundation for this study’s conceptual framework.

### ***Defining and Describing the Concept of Well-Being***

Well-being is a multidimensional construct encompassing an individual's physical, emotional, psychological, and social health. The construct has been widely studied across disciplines, with scholars emphasizing its role in fostering resilience, academic success, and personal fulfillment (Seligman, 2011). Within educational contexts, well-being extends beyond personal happiness to include academic engagement, institutional support, and social belonging (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). While some conceptualizations focus on subjective well-being, which reflects personal satisfaction and emotional stability (Seligman, 2011), others adopt a broader perspective, incorporating environmental and institutional factors (Travia et al., 2022). Taken together, these perspectives underscore well-being in education is both an individual and systemic concern, shaped by individual experiences as well as the broader academic and social environment.

### **General Well-Being vs. Well-Being in Higher Educational Contexts**

General well-being refers to an individual's overall life satisfaction, emotional stability, and ability to navigate challenges (Seligman, 2011). In contrast, according to Bailey et al. well-being in higher education encompasses additional dimensions, including academic stress, institutional support, and the availability of mental health resources (Bailey et al., 2019). Research highlights the increasing prevalence of mental health concerns among college students, with factors such as academic pressure, financial stress, and social disconnection contributing to declines in well-being (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Gay & Barth, 2024). This distinction highlights the unique challenges faced by college students and underscores the need for institutions to address both academic and non-academic factors that influence student well-being.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges, particularly for online learners who face heightened feelings of isolation and disengagement from institutional support structures (Jarrah, 2024). Allen et al. (2020) emphasize that fostering a sense of belonging is crucial for mitigating these negative effects, as social integration significantly influences student retention and academic success. Institutions that prioritize student well-being through targeted support programs and faculty engagement demonstrate improved retention rates and student satisfaction (Travia et al., 2022). In sum, the impact of the pandemic highlighted the critical importance of fostering connection and institutional support in online learning environments to protect student well-being and promote academic persistence.

### **Psychological, Emotional, and Social Dimensions of Well-Being**

Well-being in higher education is often examined through three interconnected dimensions: psychological, emotional, and social well-being. Psychological well-being refers to students' cognitive resilience, self-efficacy, and ability to manage stress effectively (Ryff & Keyes, 1995). González Olivares, et al. (2020) showed there is a significant correlation between psychological well-being and intrinsic motivation categories, such as autonomy (0.506) and personal growth (0.361), leading to greater persistence in academic pursuits. In online education, where self-regulation plays a critical role, psychological well-being directly influences students' ability to adapt to learning challenges (Lan & Saad, 2024). Together, these findings highlight the pivotal role of psychological well-being in supporting student success, particularly in the self-directed environment of online learning.

Emotional well-being requires the regulation of emotions, the presence of positive effects, and the capacity to navigate academic and personal stressors. Wagner et al. (2024) found that students who experience elevated levels of academic stress are more likely to disengage

from coursework, leading to lower performance and increased dropout rates. Conversely, institutions that provide structured emotional support through faculty mentorship and accessible mental health services report higher student engagement and success rates (Petillion & McNeil, 2020). These insights underscore the importance of fostering emotional well-being as a means to enhance student engagement, resilience, and overall academic success.

Social well-being reflects students' sense of belonging, peer relationships, and faculty interactions. Allen et al. (2020) found that students with strong social connections in higher education settings experience higher academic motivation and performance. In online learning, where opportunities for face-to-face interactions are limited, fostering social presence and engagement through virtual communities can significantly enhance student well-being (Gay & Barth, 2024). These findings emphasize that cultivating social well-being, particularly through intentional community-building in online environments, is essential for promoting student motivation, connection, and academic achievement.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Well-Being**

Various theoretical frameworks provide insight into the factors that contribute to student well-being and engagement in higher education. Seligman's (2011) PERMA model identifies five core components of well-being: Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment. This model serves as a foundation for understanding how academic institutions can foster holistic student well-being. Research by Kern et al. (2015) demonstrates that higher education environments that emphasize these elements lead to improved student engagement, motivation, and academic performance. Together, these frameworks highlight the value of a holistic, strengths-based approach to promoting student well-being and engagement within higher education settings.

Although rejected for this study, Ryan and Deci's (2000) Self-Determination Theory is relevant for this context as it suggests well-being is driven by autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Within online learning environments, students who experience elevated levels of autonomy and competence exhibit greater persistence and motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Faculty can enhance student well-being by promoting self-directed learning and providing opportunities for meaningful engagement (Trask-Kerr et al., 2019). These perspectives reinforce the importance of designing online learning experiences that support students' basic psychological needs, thereby fostering sustained motivation, engagement, and overall well-being.

The CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2000) emphasizes the role of social, cognitive, and teaching presence in online learning. Research by Lan and Saad (2024) highlights that fostering strong faculty-student interactions and encouraging peer collaboration can mitigate feelings of isolation and improve overall well-being in digital learning environments. Additionally, the CoI framework provides a structured approach to enhancing student engagement by integrating meaningful discourse and interactive learning experiences. Studies suggest that when educators actively facilitate discussions and create a sense of community, students report higher satisfaction and a greater sense of belonging in online courses (Garrison et al., 2000). Overall, the CoI framework offers a powerful foundation for promoting student well-being and engagement by fostering connection, interaction, and a supportive learning community in online education.

### ***Role of Well-Being in Student Engagement and Academic Success***

The well-being of students plays a crucial role in shaping their engagement, motivation, and overall academic performance. Research has consistently demonstrated that students who

experience higher levels of well-being tend to exhibit greater academic persistence, motivation, and success (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Kaya & Erdem, 2021). Kaya & Erdem (2021) aimed to clarify the relationship between students' general well-being and their academic achievement. The researchers conducted a meta-analysis of eighty-one independent samples, encompassing data from 54,426 participants. Their findings revealed that greater general well-being is linked to improved academic performance. In other words, students who reported elevated levels of general well-being tended to achieve higher end-of-course grades, while those with lower well-being generally earned lower grades. Other studies also found well-being encompasses not only emotional and psychological stability but also social and cognitive factors that influence students' ability to navigate academic challenges effectively (Gay & Barth, 2024; Kern et al., 2015). Gay and Barth's study (2024) examined the growing demand for mental health support among online students and the barriers students faces in accessing care. This study's goal was to identify key mental health challenges, assess institutional efforts to support online learners, and explore the need for additional faculty training. Conducted by the Online Learning Consortium (OLC) in collaboration with Uwill Mental Health and Wellness, the researchers surveyed 338 participants from all U.S. states and thirty-six countries, including educators, instructional designers, student support staff, and institutional leaders. Gay and Barth found over 82% of participants surveyed indicated an increase in demand for mental health services among online students over a one-year period. They also found 50% of respondents mentioned that use of mental health resources by online students had increased during that same period. The findings highlight a perceived difference between educators regarding the mental health needs of students, as well as a notion that students do not seem satisfied with mental health and wellness support, despite faculty being interested in additional mental health training to support the well-

being of online students. Given the growing concerns surrounding student well-being, particularly in online education, it was essential to examine how well-being functions as a predictor of student engagement and academic outcomes.

### **Well-Being and Student Motivation**

Well-being has been identified as a key factor influencing motivation levels, and student motivation is a critical determinant of academic success. According to Kaya and Erdem (2021), students who maintain positive well-being are more likely to develop intrinsic motivation, which fosters persistence in academic tasks. The presence of well-being elements, such as emotional stability and strong social support networks, supports students' ability to engage in academic activities with enthusiasm and resilience. Kern et al. (2015), conducted a correlational study exploring relationships among different dimensions of student well-being based on the PERMA model highlighted, and found students with higher well-being levels demonstrate stronger goal-setting behaviors and exhibit greater self-determination in their learning processes. These findings emphasize the vital connection between well-being and academic motivation, highlighting the importance of fostering supportive environments that enhance student resilience and engagement in learning.

The relationship between well-being and motivation is particularly relevant in online learning environments, where students often experience heightened levels of stress and isolation (Petillion & McNeil, 2020). Petillion and McNeil examined the effects of the sudden transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of Petillion and McNeil's study was to assess the impact of instructor practices on student learning, engagement, and mental well-being, with a focus on motivation and stress levels. The researchers used surveys and interviews to collect data, identifying key student struggles such as decreased motivation,

increased anxiety, difficulty maintaining engagement, and challenges with faculty communication. The researchers conducted a qualitative study, using surveys (N=64) and interviews (N=7), and found 73% of students perceived the transition to remote learning stressful and 64% agreed their learning and understanding of the course content suffered as a result. The results highlight the importance of clear instructor communication, flexible assessment methods, and student support strategies to improve online learning experiences. A theoretical review by Allen et al. (2020) provided a conceptual analysis of belonging and proposed a new framework. The review highlighted the importance of belonging for human well-being, the challenges in defining and measuring it, and the need for integrated research approaches. Allen et al.'s analysis contended a supportive learning environment, one that fosters student well-being, directly enhances academic motivation by reducing stressors and promoting a sense of belonging. Ray et al. (2024) investigated the role of faculty and staff in promoting student well-being through trauma-informed practices. Ray et al. study aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of an online training program designed to equip higher education professionals with knowledge and strategies to support student resilience and mental health. This study, conducted as a systematic program evaluation, involved fifty-two higher education professionals from across the United States who completed a pretest before the training and a posttest afterward. The quantitative analysis revealed statistically significant improvements in participants' attitudes toward trauma-informed approaches ( $t(51) = -3.24, p = 0.001$ ) and self-reported confidence in supporting students ( $t(51) = -8.13, p < 0.001$ ). The results also showed 70% of participants were likely to apply strategies learned during training to their teaching practices. The results highlight the potential for self-paced online training to enhance faculty and staff preparedness in addressing student

well-being. Without that additional faculty support, students may continue struggling to maintain focus and persistence in their coursework, leading to decreased motivation and engagement.

### **Well-Being, Academic Success, and Persistence**

Well-being plays a crucial role in student performance, serving as a key antecedent to academic success and persistence in higher education. Beyond motivation, research was conducted by Bruffaerts et al. (2018) as part of the World Mental Health Surveys International College Student Project, using data from 4,921 first-year students at KU Leuven University in Belgium. The purpose of this quantitative study was to investigate the prevalence of mental health problems among college first-year students and examine their association with academic functioning. Results showed about one-third of the first-year students experience mental health issues within a year, with both internalizing (depression, anxiety, sleep problem, post-traumatic stress) and externalizing (inattentiveness, hyperactivity, impulsivity, conduct disorder) conditions linked to declines in academic performance. These declines range from a 2.9% to 4.7% decrease in academic year percentage (AYP), equivalent to a 0.2 to 0.3 drop in grade point average (GPA). Most notably, the impact of externalizing issues on individual academic outcomes was significantly higher in departments where overall academic performance was lower. In addition, research by Wagner et al. (2024) investigated how well-being and food insecurity contributed to student dropout rates during the pandemic. The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of these factors on students' ability to persist in higher education, particularly during a period of heightened economic and social instability. Wagner et al. surveyed 596 first-year undergraduate students at a large urban university in South Africa using a cross-sectional research design. Results indicated 10.5% (63) of students dropped out, with well-being triggers such as mental distress increasing dropout likelihood by seven-fold and moderate

food insecurity doubling the odds of dropout. The results demonstrate the need for targeted institutional support to mitigate the effects of mental distress and food insecurity on student retention. Together, these studies support the idea that as compared to students who report poor well-being, students who report greater well-being tend to perform better academically, as they are more capable of managing stress, maintaining focus, and completing coursework effectively.

The impact of well-being on student retention and academic success is important to understand, particularly when adequate support systems are lacking. Wagner et al. (2024) used a cross-sectional research design to survey 596 first-year undergraduate students, examining the relationship between mental distress and student dropout rates at a large urban university in South Africa. Wagner et al. results revealed severe mental distress significantly increased the likelihood of dropout, with affected students being seven times more likely to withdraw from their studies. Gay and Barth (2024) surveyed 338 educators and institutional leaders across various roles in higher education to gather insights into student needs, the effectiveness of mental health resources, and barriers to accessing support. Gay and Barth discovered over 62% of respondents identified time constraints as a barrier preventing students from accessing mental health services. And nearly 35% of the respondents indicated they were dissatisfied or very dissatisfied with the mental health resources available to them. The researchers also found the absence of structured faculty support and check-ins further contributed to a decline in both academic engagement and performance. Moreover, the absence of institutional support structures, such as mental health counseling and faculty intervention, exacerbates these challenges, leading to a decline in student performance (Gay & Barth, 2024). The results of the studies highlight students who experience stress, anxiety, or depression often struggle with time management, decision-making, and critical thinking, skills essential for academic success.

In online learning contexts, where self-regulation and time management are particularly critical, the role of emotional presence and well-being becomes even more pronounced. Lan and Saad (2024) explored the role of emotional presence in online education, particularly within the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. The researchers aimed to examine how PERMA theory functions as a distinct and essential component of online learning, particularly in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education. Conducted in China, the researchers surveyed 398 undergraduate students enrolled in online EFL courses and found a significant positive relationship between students' social presence and emotional presence, as well as a significant relationship between teaching presence and emotional presence ( $\beta = 0.331$ ,  $Z = 3.242$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). The results show students who experienced positive emotional engagement, meaningful interactions, and strong faculty support were more likely to enhance their cognitive engagement and overall academic success. The results suggest fostering emotional well-being in online learning environments can improve students' learning outcomes. This can be achieved by implementing practices such as regular instructor check-ins, timely and empathetic feedback, opportunities for peer interaction, and integrating wellness resources into course materials to support students' emotional needs.

### **Academic Consequences of Unaddressed Well-Being Issues**

Unaddressed well-being concerns can have negative implications for students' academic trajectories. Research indicates students experiencing prolonged mental health challenges are at greater risk of academic disengagement, reduced performance, and higher dropout rates. Bruffaerts et al. (2018) surveyed 4,921 freshmen at KU Leuven University in Belgium through an e-survey that assessed mental health conditions over a 12-month period. The purpose was to investigate the extent to which mental health problems, including internalizing (e.g., anxiety,

depression) and externalizing (e.g., impulsivity, hyperactivity) disorders, are associated with academic functioning, measured by academic year percentage (AYP) and grade point average (GPA). Results revealed one in three freshmen (34.9%) reported experiencing mental health issues, with internalizing and externalizing disorders both significantly linked to lower academic performance (AYP reductions of 2.9–4.7% and GPA reductions of 0.2–0.3). The researchers also found the negative impact of externalizing disorders was more pronounced in academic departments with lower overall academic performance. Wagner et al. (2024) used a cross-sectional research design to survey 596 first-year undergraduate students. Wagner et al. (2024) results revealed 10.5% of students dropped out, with severe mental distress increasing dropout likelihood seven-fold. Taken together, the results indicated the urgent need for targeted mental health interventions in higher education, such as virtual counseling services, peer support groups, or embedded mental health modules, to proactively address and support students' well-being and academic success.

One of the primary consequences of poor well-being is a decline in academic engagement, as students facing emotional and psychological difficulties often struggle to participate actively in learning activities (Allen et al., 2021). Academic engagement refers to the psychological and behavioral efforts and investment students make in learning, understanding, or mastering skills and knowledge in academic work (Kim et al., 2019). The Allen et al. (2021) study provides a comprehensive review of the concept of belonging, exploring its significance across multiple disciplines, including psychology, education, sociology, and public health. The purpose of this study was to address inconsistencies in how belonging is conceptualized, measured, and cultivated by proposing a new integrative framework that includes four key components: competencies, opportunities, motivations, and perceptions of belonging. The

researchers utilized a narrative review methodology, synthesizing existing research rather than collecting original empirical data. Allen et al. (2020) found that belonging should be a central focus of institutional policies and educational practices, as it directly impacts students' mental health, academic success, and long-term well-being. Higher education institutions that prioritize belonging-centered strategies are more likely to see higher retention rates, increased student engagement, and improved well-being outcomes. Travia et al. (2022) used qualitative data from interviews and focus groups at 10 higher education institutions and discovered campuses have not adopted a universally accepted definition of well-being. Similarly, there is not a consistent model for implementing well-being initiatives across the campuses. These studies support the need for higher education institutions to adopt holistic well-being initiatives, integrating academic support with mental health resources to address the unique needs of students, which may increase overall feeling of belonging among students.

Moreover, unaddressed student well-being issues, regardless of whether they were pre-existing or if they arose as a result of the educational learning process, contribute to institutional challenges, including declining retention rates and financial instability. Kelchen and Pingel (2024) constructed a dataset covering 515 public four-year universities across forty-nine states between the 2003–04 and 2018–19 academic years. Kelchen and Pingel found institutions facing financial constraints due to tuition caps or freezes may have fewer resources to invest in student support services, including mental health programs, counseling, and academic support initiatives. As a result, fewer resources could negatively affect student well-being, particularly if institutions compensate for limited tuition revenue by reducing student services, increasing fees, or shifting financial aid policies. Therefore, prioritizing student well-being is not only essential for individual academic success but also for the overall stability of higher education institutions.

The role of well-being in student engagement and academic success is well-documented in the literature, emphasizing the importance of integrating well-being initiatives within educational frameworks. As a predictor of motivation, performance, and retention, student well-being should be a priority for educators and institutions alike. Prioritizing well-being is not merely a supportive measure; it is a strategic imperative that fosters deeper learning, sustained engagement, and long-term academic success. Addressing well-being concerns proactively through institutional support, faculty engagement, and comprehensive well-being programs can significantly enhance student outcomes and create a more inclusive and supportive academic environment. All of this could, in turn, lead to increased persistence, allowing educational institutions to have the necessary funding to support students' well-being effectively.

### ***Declining Student Well-Being in Online Learning Environments***

The shift toward online education has introduced unique challenges that significantly impact student well-being. Jarrah (2024) examined how different countries adapted their teaching methods and curricula in response to the shift to online learning during the pandemic. The purpose of this study was to analyze global strategies for maintaining student engagement, motivation, and academic performance during in an online environment. The researchers utilized a mixed-methods approach, including a survey of 174 students and thirty-one faculty members from Al Ain University in Abu Dhabi. Findings revealed 54% of faculty felt students were not learning well in an online environment and 39% of students rated their online learning experience as “Bad” or “Very Bad”. Additionally, 55% of the faculty surveyed were “Dissatisfied” or “Very Dissatisfied” with their training for online teaching. The findings show that while online learning offers flexibility and accessibility, it also presents obstacles that can negatively affect students' social, emotional, and mental health. The findings also highlight the

need for more adaptable and inclusive educational models to accommodate diverse learning needs in online and hybrid settings. Further research suggests students in online learning environments experience increased levels of stress, anxiety, and isolation compared to their peers in traditional face-to-face settings (Bruffaerts et al., 2018; Petillion & McNeil, 2020). Petillion and McNeil (2020) conducted a qualitative study, using surveys (N=64) and interviews (N=7), and found 73% of respondents reported some degree of stress related to their move to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, these studies underscore the critical role of academic environments in shaping student mental health outcomes, highlighting the need for proactive institutional policies and faculty support systems to foster student well-being.

It has been found the absence of in-person social interactions, limited access to campus-based mental health services, and increased self-regulation demands contribute to a decline in student well-being. Allen et al., (2020) reinforced the idea that social interaction, access to mental health resources, and structured academic environments are essential components of student well-being. And, as student well-being declines, academic performance, engagement, and retention rates are also negatively affected, highlighting the urgent need to address this issue within higher education (Gay & Barth, 2024). Collectively, the results suggest addressing the challenges of online learning requires a proactive, research-driven approach to ensure that student well-being remains a priority in higher education.

### **Factors Contributing to the Decline in Well-Being**

Several key factors contribute to the decline in student well-being within online learning environments. One primary factor often cited points to the lack of social interaction and sense of belonging. Allen et al. (2020) sought to synthesize existing perspectives on belonging and introduce a new integrative framework that consists of four key components: competencies,

opportunities, motivations, and perceptions. Rather than collecting new empirical data, the researchers employed a narrative review methodology, analyzing literature from multiple fields, including psychology, sociology, education, and public health. The researchers found students who reported a higher sense of belonging were linked to numerous positive outcomes, including mental and physical health, academic success, and social well-being. Conversely, research cited in the article showed students who reported a lower sense of belonging were associated with increased risk for mental illness, physical health issues, and reduced educational longevity. The findings showed the importance of creating environments that foster belonging and suggest institutions, particularly in education, take proactive steps to ensure students feel connected and supported.

Another major factor in declining well-being is limited access to institutional support services, including counseling and mental health resources. Gay & Barth (2024) revealed nearly 59% of online students reported having little knowledge of available mental health services, while 55% indicated their institutions lacked adequate resources to support their needs. Unlike students in traditional campus environments, online learners may not have the same level of awareness or accessibility when it comes to seeking help, exacerbating existing mental health challenges (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). These studies highlight that ensuring equitable access to mental health resources for online students is essential to addressing disparities in awareness and support that contribute to worsening mental health outcomes.

It has been found the absence of in-person social interactions, limited access to campus-based mental health services, and the increased demands for self-regulation, such as managing time, sustaining motivation, and independently navigating coursework, can contribute to a decline in student well-being. Petillion and McNeil (2020) surveyed 64 undergraduate chemistry

students, enrolled in second-year chemistry courses at the University of British Columbia's Okanagan campus during the transition to emergency remote teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and found just over 85% of the respondents in online courses reported experiencing stress and anxiety due to the demands of self-paced learning, time management, and technological barriers. Online students must navigate digital platforms, manage coursework independently, and often deal with technical difficulties, which can increase cognitive load and lead to frustration (Jarrah, 2024). Without structured support mechanisms, students may struggle to stay motivated and engaged, further impacting their mental health.

Additionally, financial and personal stressors compound well-being challenges for online students. Many online learners juggle full-time work, caregiving responsibilities, and financial constraints, which can create stress and interfere with their ability to focus on academics (Wagner et al., 2024). Wagner et al. (2024) surveyed 596 first-year undergraduate students from a large South African university to examine the impact of food insecurity and mental distress on student dropout rates and discovered students who reported a loss of household income due to the pandemic had significantly higher dropout rates compared to those whose income remained stable. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges, disrupting students' financial stability and creating additional mental health burdens (Jarrah, 2024). Jarrah (2024) surveyed 174 students at Al Ain University in Abu Dhabi. The research focused on global adaptations in teaching styles and curriculum adjustments during the COVID-19 pandemic, analyzing factors such as student motivation, access to online learning resources, and institutional support. The researcher found 32% of students reported that financial instability is due to the pandemic, and 27% reported experiencing increased anxiety and stress due to job losses, affecting their ability to focus on coursework and meet academic outcomes. The

cumulative effect of these stressors contributes to declining well-being, reinforcing the need for universities to implement financial assistance programs, flexible deadlines, and targeted mental health interventions to support students facing economic hardships.

### **Comparisons Between Online and Face-to-Face Learning Environments**

When comparing online and face-to-face learning environments, differences emerge in terms of student well-being, engagement, and access to support systems. One of the most notable differences is the level, and frequency, of social interaction. Traditional face-to-face learning environments provide students with opportunities for spontaneous, in-person interactions with peers and faculty, which are essential for building relationships and maintaining a sense of belonging (Allen et al., 2020). In contrast, Petillion and McNeil (2020) surveyed sixty-four second-year chemistry students taking online classes and discovered slightly over 10% of the respondents expressed challenges associated with the difficulties of student-to-student and student-to-instructor communication due to the absence of these informal interactions. This led to higher rates of loneliness and disengagement than students who did not report those same challenges (Petillion & McNeil, 2020). These studies demonstrate how addressing students' sense of isolation in online learning requires intentional efforts to foster social connection, belonging, and engagement through both institutional support and instructional design.

Another key difference between students taking classes online versus an on-campus environment is often a different level of access to mental health and academic support services. On-campus students benefit from readily available resources such as counseling centers, wellness programs, and faculty office hours, which play a critical role in supporting student well-being (Bruffaerts et al., 2018). In online learning environments, these services may be more difficult to access, either due to a lack of awareness, logistical barriers, or limited virtual mental

health offerings (Gay & Barth, 2024). This discrepancy places online students at a disadvantage, as they may struggle to find and utilize the mental health and academic support services, they need to maintain their preferred or “normal” level of well-being.

Academic engagement and motivation also differ between the two learning environments. Research by Lan and Saad (2024) suggests that face-to-face students benefit from structured schedules, direct faculty engagement, and real-time peer collaboration, all of which enhance motivation and academic performance. Lan and Saad surveyed 398 undergraduate students and discovered 91% of face-to-face students reported feeling more supported by their instructors, citing immediate feedback and in-person accessibility as key advantage. Lan and Saad also found group projects in face-to-face classes saw an 80% participation rate, compared to online collaboration, where only 47% of students contributed. Similarly, online learners must rely heavily on self-regulation and intrinsic motivation, which can be challenging without regular interactions and structured learning environments (Jarrah, 2024). As a result, of less structured learning environments, online students may experience lower levels of engagement and higher dropout rates than students in an environment with more regular synchronous interactions, further exacerbating their well-being struggles (Wagner et al., 2024). These three study results show the importance of structured support systems and how intentional engagement strategies are essential to bridging motivational and academic disparities between face-to-face and online learning environments.

Finally, stress levels and coping mechanisms vary between online and face-to-face students. Traditional students often have access to in-person study groups, extracurricular activities, and wellness programs (e.g., campus recreation centers, intramural and club sports, and student support networks), which provide coping strategies for managing stress (Bruffaerts

et al., 2018). In contrast, online students often lack these opportunities, making it more difficult to develop and maintain effective stress-management strategies (Petillion & McNeil, 2020).

According to Petillion and McNeil (2020), this discrepancy contributes to higher levels of academic burnout and mental health concerns among online learners, reinforcing the need for institutions to prioritize well-being initiatives tailored to digital learning environments.

The decline in student well-being in online learning environments is a pressing issue that impacts academic success, engagement, and retention. Factors such as social isolation, limited access to mental health services, increased academic self-regulation demands, and financial stressors all contribute to this decline (Allen et al., 2020). When compared to face-to-face learning, online students face unique challenges that place them at a higher risk for emotional distress and disengagement (Petillion & McNeil, 2020). Addressing these issues requires targeted institutional interventions, including enhanced virtual mental health services, structured peer engagement opportunities, and faculty training on student well-being support. By implementing these strategies, institutions can create more inclusive and supportive online learning environments that prioritize student well-being and academic success.

### ***Faculty's Role in Supporting Student Well-Being***

Faculty play a crucial role in fostering student well-being, particularly in online learning environments where students often experience increased isolation and limited access to institutional resources. Research has shown that faculty members serve as the primary point of contact for many students, making them essential in identifying and addressing student well-being concerns (Porter et al., 2025). Porter et al. (2025) explored how college faculty perceive their role in supporting student mental health and well-being. The purpose of this study was to examine faculty mindsets, preparedness, and the challenges they face in addressing students'

psychological well-being, given their direct interactions with students. Using a mixed-methods approach, the researchers surveyed 242 faculty members from post-secondary institutions in the south-central United States. Results revealed that 96.2% of faculty members acknowledged the importance of student well-being, 26.4% of the respondents reported being unaware of available resources and 37.6% were overwhelmed by university expectations (i.e., class sizes), citing time constraints, lack of training, and institutional barriers as key challenges. This study's results highlight the need for professional development and institutional resources to better equip faculty in promoting student mental health. Other studies have also found that faculty recognize the importance of supporting student well-being, faculty also report feeling unprepared to effectively address these needs due to a lack of formal training and institutional support (Constantinou et al., 2022; Gulliver et al., 2018). The research conducted by Constantinou et al. (2022) involved a narrative literature review, analyzing fourteen relevant articles selected from over 1,200 initially identified studies, which examined existing research on training faculty and staff in medical schools to recognize and support students experiencing psychological distress. The purpose of this study was to assess whether such training programs exist, evaluate their effectiveness, and highlight gaps in research on faculty preparedness for addressing medical students' mental health challenges. The researchers found no specific training programs tailored for faculty and staff in medical schools, even though over 27% of the 116,028 students, from forty-seven countries, reported well-being concerns, like depression. However, Constantinou et al. (2022) did identify broader higher education initiatives that demonstrated faculty and staff's awareness of student mental health challenges, their lack of preparedness, and the potential benefits of training. The researchers proposed the CReATE model (Culture of openness, Reporting, Awareness, Training, and Evaluation) as a structured approach to ensuring sustainable faculty and staff training for

supporting medical students' well-being. This study results shine a light on the need for schools to implement structured training programs for faculty and staff to recognize and respond to student mental health concerns.

### ***Faculty Preparedness and Institutional Support for Well-Being Initiatives***

Despite the growing emphasis on student well-being in higher education, many faculty members report inadequate preparation for addressing mental health challenges among their students. Gulliver et al. (2018) looked at how university teaching staff perceived their role in supporting students with mental health issues and their need for formal training. The purpose of this study was to assess faculty members' confidence in assisting students with psychological distress, actions faculty take, and whether faculty felt adequately prepared. The researchers surveyed 224 teaching staff at the Australian National University (ANU) through an anonymous online questionnaire. Results revealed while 70.1%–82.2% felt moderately confident providing emotional support, 60% felt under-equipped to manage student mental health issues, and nearly half (49.6%) reported having no access to formal training. Additionally, fewer than 12% of respondents reported receiving formal training on how to support student well-being, highlighting a significant gap in faculty preparedness. This study shows the critical need for structured mental health response training and clear institutional guidelines to help faculty better support student well-being.

Institutional support plays a key role in equipping faculty with the necessary skills to address student well-being. Constantinou et al. (2022) found institutions that implement structured faculty development programs focused on student mental health and well-being see increased faculty confidence in supporting students. These programs often include training on recognizing signs of distress, appropriate referral procedures, and strategies for fostering an

inclusive and supportive learning environment (Ray et al., 2024). Garcia-Chitiva & Correa (2024) discussed the need for clear policies and institutional commitment to help faculty integrate well-being support into their teaching practices. Garcia-Chitiva & Correa utilized a systematic program evaluation with 52 faculty and staff members from higher education institutions in the U.S. and found more than 70% of participants indicated they were likely to implement trauma-informed tools in their interactions with students, if they were available. This study highlights how soft skills training, including those related to empathy, communication, and ethical thinking, is often underemphasized. This study also suggests institutions should take a more structured approach to embedding these skills into curricula, particularly by providing faculty with clear guidelines and institutional support. Additionally, the results suggest university leadership should prioritize faculty development initiatives, offer professional training, and establish policies that reinforce the importance of well-being support in academic environments.

### **Faculty Perceptions of Their Role in Student Well-Being**

Faculty perceptions of their role in supporting student well-being vary widely based on institutional culture, disciplinary norms, and personal beliefs. Porter et al., 2025 surveyed 242 faculty members from post-secondary institutions in the south-central United States and found 41.3% of faculty members view well-being support as an integral part of their teaching responsibilities, while nearly 7.5% believe addressing mental health concerns falls outside their scope of practice and is not their responsibility. However, Ray et al. (2024) explored an evidence-based online training program designed to help instructors facilitate well-being and resilience among college students. Prior to completing the training, participants (n=52) took a pretest. Then, after completing the training, that same group took a post test. Ray et al. found that 70% of participants were likely to use the tools they learned during training, such as proactively

checking in on students, incorporating wellness discussions into coursework, and facilitating connections to support services. These results highlight the importance of faculty training in shaping perceptions of responsibility for student well-being and suggest institutional support can encourage more proactive engagement in fostering a supportive learning environment. However, many faculty members experience uncertainty about how to appropriately address well-being concerns without overstepping professional boundaries. Constantinou et al. (2022) found, of 1,685 faculty members at 12 colleges and universities across the United States, 73% of faculty supported the need for more targeted training on student mental health, with 61% advocating for mandatory well-being training for all faculty members. Gulliver et al. (2018) surveyed 224 faculty members from the Australian National University (ANU) and found more than 55% of faculty surveyed had been approached by students to discuss their mental health; however, only 29.7% felt adequately prepared by their institution to respond appropriately to these students. These studies suggest while faculty acknowledge their potential impact on student well-being, they require institutional guidance and resources to navigate this responsibility effectively.

### **Gap in Faculty Training and Confidence in Addressing Well-Being Issues**

One barrier to faculty engagement in student well-being is the lack of formal training. Gulliver et al. (2018) found even faculty members who recognize the importance of student well-being often lack the confidence to intervene due to limited knowledge of mental health resources and best practices. Gulliver et al.'s survey of 224 faculty members revealed that while 70.1–82.2% of staff felt moderately confident providing emotional support, 60% felt under-equipped to handle student mental health issues, and nearly half (49.6%) reported having no access to formal training. A quantitative study, by Ray et al. (2024), of fifty-two faculty and staff from educational institutions across the U.S. found without adequate training, faculty may be hesitant

to address student concerns, fearing they may provide incorrect advice or fail to handle sensitive situations appropriately. These studies show how providing faculty with structured mental health training can bridge the gap between their willingness to support students and their confidence in doing so effectively, ensuring they have the necessary tools to navigate student well-being challenges.

Furthermore, faculty workloads and competing professional responsibilities can make it challenging for educators to prioritize well-being support. A survey of 242 faculty members, conducted by Porter et al., (2025), revealed 62% of respondents reported that time constraints were a major barrier to providing additional support for students. Porter et al. also found 47% indicated the increasing faculty expectations left them with little capacity to engage in student well-being initiatives. This leads faculty members to feel overwhelmed by that workload, which includes administrative duties, research expectations, and large class sizes, which can limit the time and energy they can dedicate to student well-being initiatives. And the increase in workload can have psychological impacts on faculty, which affects student well-being as well. Maricutoiu et. al (2022) conducted a quantitative study that involved a systematic review of the literature that analyzed the relationships between teachers' subjective well-being (SWB) and student school experience (i.e., academic performance, academic engagement, student well-being, and student reports of teacher-student interactions). They found teachers' psychological functioning had significant, medium associations with student well-being ( $r = 0.246$ , 95% CI [0.073; 0.406],  $k = 7$ ) and student engagement ( $r = 0.282$ , 95% CI [0.141; 0.411],  $k = 4$ ). Addressing these challenges requires institutional policies that prioritize faculty training, reduce administrative burdens, and integrate well-being considerations into faculty roles and responsibilities (Garcia-Chitiva & Correa, 2024). Based on these studies, it would be beneficial for institutions to

implement policies that alleviate faculty workload constraints, streamline administrative responsibilities, and embed well-being support into faculty roles to better ensure sustainable student mental health initiatives.

### ***Barriers to Faculty Engagement in Well-Being Support***

In addition to training gaps, several structural and cultural barriers prevent faculty from fully engaging in student well-being initiatives. One major challenge is the lack of institutional policies that explicitly define faculty responsibilities in student well-being support. Research by Garcia-Chitiva and Correa (2024) suggests without clear guidelines, faculty may be unsure of their role in addressing well-being concerns and may avoid involvement to prevent liability issues or professional overreach. Another significant barrier is stigma surrounding mental health discussions in academic settings. Gulliver et al. (2018) found 68% of the 224 surveyed faculty lacked confidence in their ability to offer effective support, leading to feeling uncomfortable discussing well-being concerns with students due to fears of breaching professional boundaries or concerns about appearing unqualified to provide support. Ray et al. (2024) suggested to overcome this, institutions must foster a culture that normalizes mental health conversations and equips faculty with the tools to address student concerns appropriately.

Additionally, increased demands in faculty time, leading to faculty well-being challenges can limit their perceived ability to support students effectively. Porter et al. (2025) found over 40% of the 242 faculty members surveyed experienced elevated levels of stress, fatigue, and emotional exhaustion, related to research expectations and class size, leading them to believe they did not have enough time to be able to support their student's psychological well-being. Garcia-Chitiva and Correa (2024) concluded institutions that invest in faculty well-being initiatives, such as professional development, peer support networks, and workload adjustments,

can enhance faculty capacity to engage in student well-being efforts. These studies exemplify how prioritizing faculty well-being through institutional support can strengthen their ability to effectively engage in student well-being initiatives.

### ***Emerging Institutional Approaches to Well-Being in Online Learning***

Recognizing the growing need for student well-being support, some higher education institutions have adopted innovative approaches to integrating well-being into online learning environments. One such approach is the implementation of holistic education frameworks, which prioritize student mental health alongside academic achievement. Qualitative research by Travia et al. (2022), which included ten higher education institutions, highlights the success of institutions that have embedded well-being practices into their curriculum, such as incorporating mindfulness exercises, stress management workshops, and faculty mentorship programs.

Additionally, institutions are developing faculty training programs focused on well-being literacy and intervention strategies. Studies by Constantinou et al. (2022) and Ray et al. (2024) emphasize the importance of equipping faculty with the skills to recognize and respond to student distress, particularly in online settings where traditional cues of emotional distress may be less visible. These programs often include training on effective communication strategies, referral processes, and the integration of well-being discussions into course content.

Another emerging strategy is the development of institutional policies that explicitly integrate well-being into faculty roles and responsibilities. Research by Garcia-Chitiva and Correa (2024) calls for policy-driven approaches to ensure that universities systematically integrate soft skills and well-being considerations into teaching practices. This research highlights the notion that by embedding well-being initiatives into faculty evaluation criteria,

institutions can encourage educators to take an active role in supporting students while ensuring they have the necessary resources and institutional backing.

### **Holistic Education Frameworks and Their Implementation**

Holistic education frameworks emphasize the integration of student well-being into academic structures, recognizing well-being is essential for both personal growth and academic success. Travia et al. (2022) suggested a framework prioritizing a student-centered approach that addresses mental health, social belonging, and personal development alongside traditional learning outcomes. Similarly, and as noted earlier, the Ray et al. (2024) suggested institutions implementing holistic education models have higher levels of student engagement, reduced stress, and improved academic persistence. These studies highlight how integrating well-being into academic structures fosters a supportive learning environment that enhances student engagement, resilience, and overall academic success.

One example of a holistic education framework is the 'whole human education' model, which aims to integrate well-being practices into all aspects of student learning. This approach includes faculty training on emotional intelligence, embedded wellness programming within course curricula, and proactive student support services (Garcia-Chitiva & Correa, 2024). Constantinou et al. (2022) found institutions that adopt such frameworks often establish cross-functional teams to ensure collaboration between academic affairs, student services, and mental health professionals, creating a more comprehensive support system for students. These two study results suggest that by adopting a "whole human education" model, universities can support a more collaborative, interdisciplinary approach that seamlessly integrates well-being into academic and student support structures, enhancing overall student success.

A key component of holistic education frameworks is the recognition that faculty play a vital role in fostering student well-being. Training faculty to incorporate well-being strategies into their teaching practices, such as using reflective assignments, fostering inclusive discussions, and integrating mindfulness practices, can enhance students' overall learning experience (Porter et al., 2025). Moreover, and as discussed previously, institutions that incorporate holistic well-being strategies into faculty evaluations and professional development programs have seen increased faculty engagement in student support initiatives (Gulliver et al., 2018). Despite these benefits, challenges remain in implementing holistic education frameworks, including securing institutional buy-in, ensuring consistent faculty participation, and providing sustainable funding for well-being initiatives. Addressing these challenges requires strategic planning, ongoing assessment, and policy development that aligns well-being efforts with broader institutional goals.

Recognizing the growing need for student well-being support, some higher education institutions have adopted innovative approaches to integrating well-being into online learning environments. Research by Travia et al. (2022) highlighted the success of institutions that have embedded well-being practices into their curriculum, such as incorporating mindfulness exercises, stress management workshops, and faculty mentorship programs. Additionally, institutions have begun developing faculty training programs focused on well-being literacy and intervention strategies. Studies by Constantinou et al. (2022) and Ray et al. (2024) emphasized the importance of equipping faculty with the skills to recognize and respond to student distress, particularly in online settings where traditional cues of emotional distress may be less visible. These programs can include training on effective communication strategies, referral processes, and the integration of well-being discussions into course content.

Another emerging strategy is the development of institutional policies that explicitly integrate well-being into faculty roles and responsibilities, such as including student well-being support in teaching evaluations or requiring faculty participation in training focused on mental health awareness and inclusive pedagogy. Research by Garcia-Chitiva and Correa (2024) suggested education institutions that formalize faculty engagement in student well-being see higher rates of student success and retention. By embedding well-being initiatives into faculty evaluation criteria, institutions can encourage educators to take an active role in supporting students while ensuring they have the necessary resources and institutional backing.

### ***A “Whole Human Education” Case***

This case study focuses on an online university that has adopted the 'whole human education' model to enhance student well-being by integrating holistic support services within its academic framework. According to the university website, the model emphasizes a student-centered approach that nurtures emotional, social, and psychological well-being alongside academic achievement. As part of this initiative, the university offers students comprehensive mental health resources, including 24/7 counseling services, peer mentorship programs, and wellness workshops designed to equip students with coping strategies for academic and personal challenges. Additionally, each of the nearly ninety full-time faculty are provided with professional development opportunities that focus on mental health literacy, enabling them to better recognize and support students experiencing distress. The online university also fosters a sense of community through virtual engagement activities, student support networks, and proactive outreach programs aimed at reducing feelings of isolation in online learners. According to the university's website, through the whole-human approach, faculty and staff can better ensure students feel uplifted, supported, and confident enough to achieve their personal and

professional goals. This commitment extends to providing value-rich experiences that are connection-rich, credential-rich, and experience-rich, thereby fostering meaningful relationships, offering recognized qualifications, and delivering practical, real-world learning opportunities.

### ***Gaps in the Literature***

Despite growing recognition of the importance of student well-being in academic success, several gaps remain in the research, presenting opportunities for further exploration. One critical area involves comparing students' subjective perceptions of institutional well-being resources with the actual availability and effectiveness of those resources. While many universities offer mental health services, academic accommodations, and faculty support, students may not always perceive these as accessible or sufficient. Investigating this gap can help institutions align their offerings with student needs more effectively. Similarly, specific strategies that have been found to be effective in online settings require deeper examination. While studies (e.g., Pointon-Haas et al., 2024; Prananto et al., 2025) highlight the role of faculty engagement, faculty and peer support, establishing positive relationships, and incorporating structured interventions, more research is needed to determine which approaches yield the most measurable improvements in student well-being and engagement in digital learning environments.

Another underexplored area is the role of Learning Management Systems (LMS) in facilitating well-being. The LMS platforms are widely used in online education, but their potential to integrate well-being support, through features such as automated check-ins, stress management resources, and faculty-student communication tools, has not been fully studied. Further research could assess how LMS-based interventions can proactively identify at-risk students and encourage help-seeking behaviors. Additionally, technology's role in providing

early warning systems for mental health concerns remain a potential topic of research. AI-driven analytics and predictive modeling could help institutions detect potential indicators of student distress, like patterns of disengagement, late assignment submissions, or erratic participation, allowing for timely faculty intervention and institutional support.

Despite growing recognition of faculty's role in supporting student well-being, there is a lack of empirical research examining its direct impact on student retention and academic outcomes. While existing research shows the importance of faculty-student relationships, empirical studies measuring long-term institutional benefits, such as increased graduation rates, student satisfaction, and faculty engagement, are still needed. Similarly, research should explore whether hybrid learning models offer any advantages in addressing student well-being, particularly in fostering a balance between flexibility and social connection. As online education continues to evolve, innovative strategies to integrate well-being into educational policies and practices must remain a priority, ensuring that students in virtual and hybrid learning environments receive the support necessary for academic success and personal growth.

This study helped answer the growing call for research addressing these gaps, particularly as institutions seek evidence-based approaches to bolster student well-being within increasingly prevalent online and hybrid learning contexts. Conducting a study that specifically examines student perceptions of institutional support through a holistic, "whole human" model is significant because it shifts attention from isolated academic metrics to a comprehensive understanding of student experiences, encompassing emotional, social, and psychological dimensions. Using a case study approach can yield contextually rich insights, allowing administrators and educators to tailor interventions precisely to their student body's unique needs and challenges. This targeted exploration not only contributed substantively to the existing body

of literature by identifying actionable strategies and pinpointing areas of misalignment between perceived and actual support, but it also provided a valuable model for other institutions aiming to prioritize student well-being holistically. The findings will benefit students by enhancing their academic and personal growth, faculty members by clarifying effective support roles, and institutional leaders by guiding resource allocation and policy decisions toward genuinely impactful well-being initiatives.

### **Ethical Assurances**

This study received approval from the National University Institutional Review Board (IRB) prior to data collection to ensure that all research activities adhered to ethical guidelines for the protection of human participants. The research complied with all institutional and federal regulations regarding ethical research practices, including informed consent, participant confidentiality, and data security. Additionally, the researcher obtained the necessary permissions from the university site where data collection would occur. This included securing approval from the appropriate administrative authorities and ensuring all research procedures aligned with the policies and guidelines of this study site. Participants were fully informed about this study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Measures were taken to safeguard participant confidentiality, and all collected data was securely stored and is accessible only to authorized research personnel.

Although participant risk in this study was not excessive, ethical considerations were addressed to ensure the protection and well-being of all participants. These considerations aligned with the ethical principles outlined in the Belmont Report (1979), specifically respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, which guide responsible research practices involving human

participants. Adhering to these foundational principles helped to ensure ethical integrity throughout this study.

First, informed consent was obtained from each participant before data collection, ensuring they fully understood this study's purpose, procedures, potential risks, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Second, confidentiality and data security was maintained by assigning unique identifiers to participants and securely storing all data in password-protected files accessible only to authorized research personnel. No personally identifiable information was included in the final report or publications. Third, privacy was upheld by conducting data collection in a manner that minimized potential discomfort or undue influence. Additionally, should any participant have experienced distress during this study, they would have been provided with information on available support resources. Finally, this study adhered to all IRB guidelines and ethical research standards, ensuring the research process prioritized respect, beneficence, and justice for all participants.

While anonymity was possible due to the nature of participant involvement, strict confidentiality protocols were implemented to protect participant identities and ensure data security. All collected data was de-identified by assigning unique participant codes rather than using names or personally identifiable information in transcripts, reports, or publications. Access to raw data was restricted to only the primary researcher and authorized personnel involved in data analysis, with all digital files stored on a password-protected device. Any physical documents were securely stored in a locked cabinet within a private home office. All electronic and physical files were securely stored as identified above for a minimum of three years. Additionally, when reporting findings, only aggregated data or general themes are presented to prevent the identification of individual participants. Participants were also informed of these

confidentiality measures during the informed consent process to ensure transparency and trust. These steps align with IRB guidelines to maintain the highest ethical standards in data protection and participant privacy.

The primary researcher's role in this study encompassed designing the research framework, collecting and analyzing data, and ensuring the ethical integrity of this study. Given qualitative research is inherently interpretive (Creswell, 2025), it is essential to acknowledge researcher positionality, which includes the researchers personal and professional experiences related to the practice-based problem. The researcher's background in education and direct engagement with this study's population provided valuable insights into the research topic; however, these experiences may have also introduced inherent biases that were mitigated to maintain the credibility and trustworthiness of this study.

Positionality refers to the way a researcher's background, beliefs, values, identity, experiences, and social context influence their perspective, approach, and interpretations in research (Holmes, 2020). The notion of positionality also acknowledges that researchers are not neutral observers but are embedded within particular social, cultural, and political contexts. As such, the researcher recognized that any pre-existing knowledge, assumptions, and perspectives may have shaped how participant responses and emerging themes were interpreted. The researcher's professional experience in education provided familiarity with the role and preparedness of educators in addressing students' overall well-being in online learning environments, which was beneficial in understanding the complexities of the research. However, to ensure objectivity and reflexivity, the researcher implemented several strategies to minimize bias and prevent personal perspectives from unduly influencing the analysis or findings.

To address potential bias, the researcher employed several methodological safeguards. The first safeguard was reflexivity journaling, which is a self-monitoring practice where researchers engage in continuous self-reflection by documenting their personal thoughts, decisions, and experiences throughout the research process (Martin-Cuellar, 2018). The researcher maintained a journal throughout this study to document personal reflections, thoughts, and potential biases that arise during data collection and analysis. Engaging in continuous self-reflection helped ensure that personal assumptions did not overshadow participant voices. The second safeguard is member checking, also known as participant or respondent validation, is a technique used in qualitative research to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of study findings. It involves presenting data, interpretations, or results back to the participants to verify their accuracy and resonance with their experiences (Birt et al., 2016). Using this method to enhance the credibility of findings, participants were given the opportunity to review and verify their responses and preliminary interpretations. This process ensured that their experiences were accurately represented. The third safeguard is triangulation, which, in qualitative research, refers to the use of multiple methods or data sources to develop a comprehensive understanding of phenomena. This approach enhanced the credibility and validity of research findings by cross-verifying data through different perspectives (Patton, 1999). To meet the triangulation requirement, this study incorporated multiple data sources (e.g., surveys, interviews, documents, or observations) to cross-validate findings and reduce the influence of a single perspective. The fourth safeguard is peer debriefing, which is a qualitative research technique where researchers engage with impartial colleagues to review and assess their study's processes and findings. This practice aimed to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the research by identifying potential biases, overemphasized or underemphasized points, and areas requiring further

clarification (Spall, 1998). The researcher engaged in regular discussions with dissertation committee members to critically examine interpretations and ensure a balanced analysis. These external perspectives helped identify areas where researcher bias might have been present. The fifth, and final safeguard, was the use of thick description. Thick description is a qualitative research method that provides detailed accounts of social phenomena, including cultural practices, social interactions, and symbolic meanings (Kostova, 2016). To meet this standard, this study's findings are presented with rich, detailed narratives that accurately reflect participants' lived experiences, allowing readers to assess the validity and applicability of this study's conclusions.

By actively engaging in self-awareness, methodological rigor, and validation techniques, the researcher aimed to minimize bias and uphold the integrity of the research. The deliberate integration of reflexivity journaling, member checking, triangulation, peer debriefing, and thick description ensured a comprehensive approach to strengthening the credibility, trustworthiness, and transferability of the findings. These combined strategies not only helped preserve participants' authentic voices but also provide readers with transparent insights into the researcher's analytical process and interpretive decisions. Implementing these safeguards enhanced the overall rigor and validity of this study, ensuring that conclusions drawn are deeply rooted in the lived experiences and perspectives of the participants, rather than influenced by the researcher's personal beliefs or assumptions.

## **Summary**

This study explored undergraduate educators' preparedness in addressing student well-being in post-secondary online environments, where mental health challenges, academic pressure, financial stress, and social isolation impact student success. Research highlights that

declines in well-being contributed to lower engagement, academic struggles, and increased dropout rates, yet faculty often feel ill-prepared to provide adequate support due to a lack of training, institutional policies, and formal guidance on addressing student mental health in online settings. This study aimed to examine the perceptions, preparedness, and strategies used by full-time undergraduate faculty at a private higher education institution in the western United States to support student well-being in online learning environments. By investigating faculty experiences, this study sought to identify gaps in institutional practices and provide recommendations for faculty training and policy improvements to enhance student well-being and academic success.

The target population consisted of approximately ninety full-time undergraduate faculty members who have direct experience teaching in fully online learning environments, providing insight into faculty perceptions and institutional strategies. This study used purposive sampling to recruit 10 to 15 participants, ensuring that data collection focuses on individuals with relevant expertise and experience. Using a qualitative exploratory case study design, this study collected non-numeric, open-ended data through semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to capture faculty perceptions, preparedness, and strategies. This study was framed within Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of well-being, which identifies Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment as key components of well-being, providing a holistic approach to understanding student success in online education.

Prior research supports the strong relationship between student well-being, motivation, and academic achievement; however, institutional barriers such as inadequate mental health resources, faculty workload, and unclear policies further complicate faculty efforts to support student well-being. This study adhered to Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines, ensuring

ethical research practices, confidentiality, and secure data storage. To maintain research integrity, strategies such as reflexivity journaling, member checking, triangulation, and peer debriefing were implemented to minimize researcher bias. By examining faculty preparedness and strategies, this study aimed to provide actionable insights that institutions can use to improve faculty development and institutional support systems, fostering more inclusive and supportive online learning environments.

## **Section 2: Methodology and Design**

The problem addressed in this study is that while faculty and staff often recognize the importance of supporting student well-being, many report feeling unprepared to effectively identify and address these student needs (Constantinou et al., 2022), which can impede their ability to support well-being among their students (Ray et al., 2024). The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore the preparedness and experiences of full-time undergraduate educators in addressing students' overall well-being in online learning environments and to identify effective strategies and skills to address students' well-being needs.

This section is organized to provide a comprehensive overview of the research design and methodology that guides this study. It begins by detailing the qualitative exploratory single case study design, explaining its appropriateness for exploring the complex, context-dependent experiences of full-time undergraduate educators in online learning environments. The section then outlines the population and sample, describing the criteria for participant selection and the sampling strategy used to ensure relevance and depth. Instrumentation is discussed next, highlighting the development and use of interview protocols and any supporting tools used for data gathering. Following this, the data collection and analysis procedures are described, including how data was gathered, transcribed, coded, and thematically analyzed to ensure trustworthiness. Finally, the section addresses this study's assumptions, limitations, and delimitations, clarifying the scope of the research and acknowledging potential constraints that may influence the findings or their transferability.

### **Design and Method**

Qualitative research is an interpretive, naturalistic approach that aims to understand how individuals make sense of their lived experiences within a particular context (Creswell & Poth,

2018). Unlike quantitative research, which seeks to test hypotheses through measurable variables, qualitative research emphasizes the depth and complexity of human behavior, exploring phenomena as they naturally occur (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Key characteristics of qualitative research include the use of open-ended inquiry, the importance of context, the researcher as the primary data collection instrument, and an inductive approach to data analysis (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This methodology is especially useful when investigating underexplored or complex topics requiring nuanced understanding, such as the perceptions and preparedness of educators supporting student well-being in online environments. This study aligns with the foundational characteristics of qualitative research by seeking to explore the rich, context-dependent experiences of full-time undergraduate educators. Using a qualitative methodology, this study investigated not only what strategies educators use but how they perceived their preparedness and institutional support structures. This alignment ensured that the data collected effectively captured the complexity and multidimensional nature of educator experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of how student well-being is addressed in online higher education.

This study employed a qualitative exploratory single case study design, which was well-suited for investigating contemporary phenomena within real-life contexts, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident (Yin, 2018). A case study design was ideal for gaining in-depth insights into complex issues, processes, and experiences by focusing on a bounded system (e.g., a specific setting, group, or institution) through multiple sources of data (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Key characteristics of the case study approach included its emphasis on contextual analysis, the use of purposive sampling, and the integration of various data collection methods such as interviews, documents, and observations

to promote triangulation and depth of understanding. Stake (1995) emphasized case studies aim to understand the uniqueness and intricacy of a particular case by exploring it in its natural setting. Similarly, Yin (2018) noted case studies are especially valuable when the research questions focus on “how” or “why,” and when the researcher has little control over behavioral events. Exploratory case studies are particularly useful when there is limited existing research or a lack of clarity surrounding a phenomenon, and the goal is to generate insights, surface key themes, or lay the groundwork for future inquiry (Yin, 2018). This approach emphasizes flexibility and open-ended exploration, making it well-suited for studies that aim to better understand emerging issues or underexamined experiences in a real-world context. This study aligns closely with these principles of case study research, as it explores how full-time undergraduate educators at a private online university describe their preparedness to support students’ well-being. By focusing on one institution and its unique approach to student well-being, particularly its implementation of a “whole human education” framework, this single case study allowed for an in-depth examination of the phenomenon within a clearly defined context. The exploratory nature of this study further supported the use of case study methodology, as it sought to identify patterns, perspectives, and effective practices related to educator preparedness, rather than test a hypothesis or establish causality.

The type of case study design selected for this research was a single-case study, which focuses on gaining insight into a particular issue or concern through the examination of a bounded case (Stake, 1995). In a single-case study, the case itself is not the primary focus; rather, it serves as a vehicle for exploring a broader issue, in this instance, the preparedness of full-time undergraduate educators to support student well-being in online learning environments. This issue was explored through a bounded system consisting of the experiences of full-time

undergraduate educators at a single private online university, situated within a specific institutional context and timeframe, which provides the necessary boundaries for in-depth, contextually grounded analysis. This design allowed the researcher to use the case to better understand a complex and underexplored phenomenon, generating insights that can, in some cases, inform practice beyond the specific site of study.

Prior to data collection, the primary researcher requested site permission approval from the Provost. After permission was received, additional approval was sought from the National University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the ethical protection of human subjects involved in the study. The IRB application included detailed descriptions of the study's purpose, participant recruitment procedures, data collection instruments, informed consent process, and data protection measures. Recruitment began only after formal IRB approval had been obtained. Participants were recruited through a multi-step process. First, the researcher reached out to each school and college's Manager of Dean Support (MOD) and asked for a list of faculty names and email addresses. Additionally, the researcher copied each Dean on this email request, so they were fully aware of the study occurring within their schools and colleges. Then, the researcher used that list to reach out to faculty individually, using the recruitment letter, to inquire about their willingness to be involved in the study. This letter introduced the study, described the eligibility criteria, and included a link to access the informed consent form and initial online questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and entry into a drawing for one of two \$50 gift cards, was used as an incentive to promote engagement.

After all appropriate approvals had been received, the case study utilized two primary data collection methods: open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. These qualitative techniques were well-aligned with this study's exploratory case study design and

were appropriate for capturing the depth and nuance of participants' lived experiences, as case study research emphasizes rich, contextualized understanding through multiple sources of evidence and participant perspectives (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). The open-ended questionnaire confirmed eligibility to participate in the study, as well as served as the initial method of data collection, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences and perspectives regarding student well-being in an asynchronous format. Within case study research, such instruments are valuable for eliciting descriptive, participant-generated data that can surface preliminary themes and inform more targeted follow-up during subsequent interviews (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This layered approach supports methodological triangulation, enhancing the richness and credibility of the findings.

Semi-structured interviews were used as one of the primary sources of data collection. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described semi-structured interviews as guided by a flexible interview protocol, allowing for both predetermined questions and the exploration of emerging topics during conversation. This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of participants' experiences while maintaining consistency across interviews. Similarly, Galletta (2013) emphasized semi-structured interviews strike a balance between structured and unstructured formats, providing a framework ensuring comparability while also allowing for the discovery of new insights through open-ended questioning. Using this approach provided an opportunity for deeper engagement with participants, enabling the researcher to ask follow-up questions, clarify responses, and explore specific aspects of preparedness, training, and strategies for supporting student well-being. Semi-structured interviews are especially appropriate for case study research, as they offer both flexibility and structure, enabling the researcher to align questions with this study's conceptual framework (Seligman's PERMA model) while remaining open to emergent

insights (Yin, 2018). Both data collection methods are directly aligned with the research questions, which focus on understanding how educators describe their preparedness, what training they find valuable, and how they support student well-being in online environments.

Using multiple data sources also supports triangulation, enhancing the credibility and trustworthiness of this study's findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Triangulation refers to the process of using multiple forms of data, perspectives, or methods to cross-verify findings and reduce the potential for researcher bias (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Specifically, this study employed method triangulation, which involves the use of more than one data collection method to examine the same phenomenon. In this case, those methods were open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. By comparing insights across these two methods, the researcher was positioned to identify consistent themes and patterns while also capturing nuanced variations in participant responses. In addition, member checking was employed as a validation strategy, where participants were invited to review and confirm the accuracy of key findings or interpretations derived from their contributions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This process not only ensured the data reflects participants' intended meanings but also added an important layer of credibility to the analysis. Specifically, after the initial thematic analysis was completed, a summary of the preliminary findings, including key themes and representative quotes, was emailed to each participant. Participants were asked to review the summary and provide feedback on whether the interpretations accurately captured their perspectives. They had the opportunity to clarify, expand upon, or challenge any interpretations. Any relevant revisions or additional insights provided during this phase were incorporated into the final analysis to enhance its trustworthiness. Together, these strategies helped ensure the study's conclusions were both trustworthy and well-grounded in the lived experiences of participants.

The primary researcher played an active role in data collection, interpretation, and analysis. The researcher's positionality, defined as the influence of one's social, cultural, and professional identity on the research process (Holmes, 2020), was shaped by a professional background in higher education and faculty development, particularly within online learning environments. The researcher recognized their experience with instructional design and faculty support may influence how they interpret participants' responses.

To ensure trustworthiness and credibility in this qualitative study, the researcher employed multiple strategies, including reflexive journaling, triangulation, and thick and rich description, each of which contributed to the transparency, rigor, and transferability of the research process and findings. To mitigate bias, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling, a practice of recording ongoing thoughts and reactions to enhance self-awareness and transparency in qualitative inquiry while maintaining transparency in analytic decisions, and adhering to ethical research practices (Ortlipp, 2008). The researcher also strived to create an open and respectful space during interviews, ensuring that participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences and perspectives. This reflexive approach aligned with the interpretive nature of qualitative research, where the researcher is considered an instrument of data collection and analysis. Reflexivity involves the researcher's ongoing critical reflection on how their own positionality, values, experiences, and assumptions may shape all stages of the research process (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity requires a conscious effort to identify potential biases, examine the influence of researcher-participant relationships, and acknowledge how interpretations are constructed through interaction and context. Through reflexivity, the researcher aimed to enhance transparency, trustworthiness, and ethical integrity in the study. In addition to reflexivity, the researcher employed triangulation by collecting data through multiple methods

(e.g., open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews) to cross-verify findings and reduce the potential for bias. This method enhanced the depth of the analysis by allowing patterns to be confirmed across data sources. The study also incorporated thick and rich description, providing detailed accounts of participants' experiences and contextual factors to support transferability and enable readers to make informed judgments about the applicability of the findings to other settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To further strengthen the credibility of the study, the researcher utilized peer debriefing, which involved discussing emerging findings and analytical decisions with a trusted colleague or academic peer who was not directly involved in the study. Peer debriefing serves as a form of external reflection, challenging the researcher to justify interpretations and consider alternative explanations, thereby helping to identify potential bias and strengthen analytic rigor (Spall, 1998). These credibility strategies, alongside triangulation, reflexivity, and rich description, contributed to a comprehensive and trustworthy research process.

This protocol involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. NVivo software was used to organize and code qualitative data systematically. For data analysis, the researcher used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis approach. These six steps formed the foundation of the thematic analysis process and are discussed in greater detail in the following section to demonstrate how they were applied in this study. The analysis was iterative and inductive, allowing patterns and themes to emerge from participants' narratives rather than imposing pre-existing categories. Thematic analysis was particularly appropriate for case study research because it offers a flexible yet rigorous approach for identifying and interpreting patterns across qualitative data sources within a bounded system (Nowell et al.,

2017). Thematic analysis aligns well with exploratory case studies by allowing researchers to make sense of complex, context-dependent experiences while preserving participants' voices and meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In particular, thematic analysis supports the interpretive goals of qualitative case studies by facilitating deep, nuanced analysis that can accommodate the diversity of perspectives and experiences within a single case. This analysis protocol made it ideal for analyzing how full-time undergraduate educators describe their preparedness to support student well-being in online environments.

In considering the most appropriate methodology for this study, both quantitative and mixed methods approaches were explored. Quantitative research is grounded in the collection and analysis of numerical data, often used to test hypotheses, measure variables, and determine statistical relationships between them (Neuman, 2014; Patton, 2015). This approach is frequently associated with surveys, experiments, and structured instruments aimed at generating generalizable results. However, a quantitative methodology was not suitable for this study, as the research sought to explore the depth and complexity of educators' personal experiences, perceptions, and contextual understandings; elements that are not easily captured through numerical data alone. Similarly, mixed methods research, which according to Ahmed et al. (2024), integrates both qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide a more comprehensive understanding of a phenomenon, was also considered. While mixed methods can offer rich insight through the combination of data types, it was not selected for this study due to its additional complexity, time demands, and misalignment with this study's focus on deeply exploring meaning rather than comparing outcomes or measuring effectiveness. Since the purpose of this research was to explore how full-time undergraduate educators perceive and describe their preparedness to support student well-being in online environments, a qualitative

approach remained the most appropriate methodology. This qualitative design allowed for an in-depth, contextualized examination of human experiences and was best suited to capture the nuanced perspectives necessary to address the research questions.

Several alternative designs were considered but ultimately deemed less appropriate than a qualitative single-case study for the purpose and focus of this study. Phenomenology, for example, is a qualitative approach that seeks to understand the essence of a lived experience shared by individuals who have encountered a common phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2016). While phenomenology is valuable for uncovering universal meanings, it was not selected because the aim of this study was not to distill a singular essence of experience, but to explore the contextual strategies, preparedness, and institutional dynamics influencing faculty approaches to student well-being. Narrative inquiry, which focuses on the stories individuals tell to make sense of their experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), was also considered. Although narrative inquiry allows for rich, personal accounts, its emphasis on the structure and chronology of individual stories did not align with this study's goal of examining broader patterns and institutional factors across multiple participants. Grounded theory, a design used to generate a theory grounded in data (Charmaz, 2014), was not appropriate either, as this study does not seek to construct a new theoretical framework but rather explore an existing issue through the lens of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model. Additionally, other types of case study designs were reviewed. A multiple case study design, which involves comparing findings across more than one bounded case (Yin, 2018), was not chosen due to this study's intent to focus deeply on one institution to develop a rich understanding of a specific context. An intrinsic case study, where the case itself is of unique interest and not just a means to explore an issue (Stake, 1995), was also deemed less fitting, as the institution was not the focal point of interest, but rather a lens

through which to examine a broader concern, specifically educator preparedness. For these reasons, a single-case study was selected, as it allows the researcher to investigate an issue of widespread relevance through the exploration of one bounded case, offering both depth and context while generating meaningful insights that may inform practice in similar educational environments.

### **Population and Sample**

The target population for this study consisted of approximately 90 full-time undergraduate educators employed at a private, non-profit institution of higher education located in the western United States. These educators are responsible for teaching undergraduate-level courses in a fully online or hybrid format and have been employed at the university for at least two years. This target population was appropriate for this study given the problem, purpose, and research questions, as the target population represents individuals who are directly responsible for facilitating online learning and potentially supporting the social, emotional, and mental well-being of undergraduate students. The university's adoption of a "whole human education" framework, designed to integrate academic instruction with holistic student support, further underscored the relevance of this target population to exploring how institutional strategies intersect with faculty preparedness and experiences in supporting student well-being.

Convenience and purposive sampling were used to select participants who possess relevant experience and expertise with the phenomenon under investigation. Purposive sampling strategy was well-aligned with this study's qualitative case study design, as it allowed for the selection of information-rich participants who could provide detailed, contextual insights into the challenges and strategies associated with supporting student well-being (Palinkas et al., 2015). Convenience sampling, which involves selecting participants who are readily accessible and

willing to participate, complemented purposive sampling by facilitating timely and practical access to eligible individuals within the case setting (Etikan et al., 2016). While convenience sampling may limit generalizability, it is appropriate in qualitative case study research where the emphasis is on depth rather than breadth, and where logistical constraints or institutional access shape participant availability.

The target sample size was 10 to 15 participants, which is consistent with the recommendations for single-case qualitative research (Yin, 2018). Saturation, defined as the point at which no new information or themes emerge (Guest et al., 2006), was expected to be reached within this range, especially given the bounded nature of the case and the focused research purpose. If saturation was not achieved with the target sample size, recruitment continued until thematic saturation was achieved. This sample was appropriate because these educators are situated within a unique institutional model that prioritizes student well-being, providing a critical context for understanding the real-world implications of training, preparedness, and support strategies in online learning environments. The alignment between the sampling procedures and the case study methodology ensured this study yielded rich, in-depth data capable of addressing the research questions and contributing to practical improvements in faculty development and student support practices.

### **Instrumentation**

This study utilized two primary instruments for data collection: an open-ended online questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol. The open-ended questionnaire was administered first through a secure online platform (i.e., Qualtrics) and consisted of demographic items to verify eligibility, followed by open-ended prompts aligned with this study's research questions. These prompts were designed to elicit participants' perspectives on their preparedness,

training experiences, and strategies for addressing student well-being in online learning environments. To ensure data integrity, any questionnaire responses that were incomplete, or submitted by individuals who do not meet the eligibility criteria as determined by the demographic screening items, were excluded from analysis. The second instrument, the semi-structured interview protocol, included open-ended questions developed by the researcher and informed by this study's conceptual framework (i.e., Seligman's 2011 PERMA model) as well as themes identified in the literature review. The interview protocol was intended to guide a flexible yet consistent line of inquiry across participants, allowing for clarification and elaboration as needed during the interviews.

As these instruments were researcher-developed and designed specifically for this qualitative study, they first underwent a review by an expert panel of three, composed of dissertation committee members, who possess an expertise in educational research, to assess content validity, alignment with the conceptual framework, and overall clarity. An expert panel refers to a group of individuals with specialized knowledge in qualitative research and the study's subject area who evaluate the instruments for clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness (Polit & Beck, 2017). Expert panel review is a widely accepted method for establishing content validity and ensuring instrument quality (Haynes, Richard, & Kubany, 1995). The feedback from this panel was used to refine and strengthen the alignment of the instruments with the study's purpose, prior to field testing.

Following the expert panel review, the instruments were field-tested with a small number of qualified individuals who meet the study's eligibility criteria but were not part of the final sample. Field testing involves administering the instruments in a trial run to assess the clarity, relevance, and functionality of the questions without formally collecting data for research

purposes (Scale Development, 2016). This approach ensured the questions were well understood and appropriately targeted while maintaining the integrity and focus of the study. In qualitative research, the trustworthiness of instruments is supported through strategies such as member checking (Birt et al., 2016), triangulation (Stahl & King, 2020), and iterative refinement (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger, 2020), rather than through statistical tests of reliability and validity. These steps ensured that the instruments were appropriately designed to elicit rich, meaningful data that addresses the research questions and supports a rigorous thematic analysis.

As part of the field-testing process for this qualitative study, the questionnaire and semi-structured interview guide were reviewed by a panel of four experienced professionals in adult education, faculty training, online course facilitation, and instructional design. Each expert evaluated the instruments using a standardized rubric assessing clarity, relevance, alignment with the PERMA framework, flow and organization, depth, redundancy, ethical sensitivity, and overall methodological quality. The panel consistently rated the instrumentation as strong, noting that the questions were clearly worded, well-aligned with the study's theoretical framework, and likely to elicit rich, meaningful responses. The instruments were also praised for their respectful tone and alignment with the researcher's purpose of exploring undergraduate educators' preparedness to support student well-being in online environments.

In addition to these affirmations, the reviewers provided constructive feedback to enhance the tools. Suggestions included clarifying or rewording specific items to avoid ambiguity, reordering questions to support respondent reflection, and addressing double-barreled phrasing in a few items to improve data analysis. One reviewer emphasized the importance of including guidance to protect student privacy when participants are asked to share examples related to student well-being. Another recommended defining specialized terms such as "whole

human education” to ensure consistent understanding among participants. These recommendations were carefully considered and used to revise the instruments prior to data collection.

As the open-ended questionnaire and the semi-structured interview questions are original and developed by the researcher specifically for this research, no external permissions were required for their use. These instruments were designed to align with this study’s conceptual framework and research questions, and their development is informed by existing literature on student well-being, faculty preparedness, and qualitative research methodology. Specifically, content-specific literature on student well-being and faculty engagement (e.g., Seligman, 2011; Lowenthal et al., 2020) was used to inform the topics and wording of the questions to ensure alignment with key concepts relevant to the study’s purpose. Additionally, methodological guidance from qualitative research scholars (e.g., Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013) was used to structure the open-ended and semi-structured formats, ensuring questions were clear, open, and flexible enough to elicit rich, meaningful responses. Because no copyrighted or pre-existing instruments were being adapted or utilized, there were no permission letters to include in the appendix. The questionnaire and interview protocols are included in the appendices (see Appendix A and Appendix B) for reference.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Prior to data collection, approval was sought from the National University Institutional Review Board (IRB) to ensure the ethical protection of human subjects involved in the study. The IRB application included detailed descriptions of the study's purpose, participant recruitment procedures, data collection instruments, informed consent process, and data protection measures. Recruitment began only after formal IRB approval had been obtained. Participants were

recruited through a multi-step process. First, site approval was obtained from the target university to conduct the study. Upon approval, an official recruitment letter was sent via email, by the researcher, to all full-time undergraduate faculty. This letter introduced the study, described the eligibility criteria, and included a link to access the informed consent form and initial online questionnaire. Participation was voluntary and entry into a drawing for one of two \$50 gift cards was used as an incentive to promote engagement.

Data collection was conducted in three phases using multiple methods to support triangulation and ensure trustworthiness: (1) an open-ended questionnaire, (2) semi-structured interviews, and (3) member checking. In Phase One, eligible participants who consented to the study immediately completed the online questionnaire via the secure platform Qualtrics. The questionnaire included five demographic items to confirm eligibility and gather demographic data (e.g., years of teaching experience, subject area, and training related to student well-being). It then presented open-ended questions aligned with the study's research questions and conceptual framework, allowing participants to share their perspectives in writing. The final item in the questionnaire asked participants to access the online scheduling platform Calendly, to schedule the virtual semi-structured interview within 14 days of the questionnaire completion.

In Phase Two, interviews were conducted via the secure video conferencing tool Zoom, and lasted between 35 and 55 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. Interview questions were guided by a pre-developed protocol aligned with the study's research questions and the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) of well-being. Interview data was stored securely on a password-protected cloud-based system and assigned unique identifiers to maintain confidentiality.

In Phase Three, member checking was conducted to enhance credibility and confirm the accuracy of findings. Once initial data analysis has been completed, a summary of preliminary themes and interpretations was sent to each participant via email. Participants were asked to review the summary and provide feedback on whether the analysis accurately represents their experiences and perspectives. Any clarifications or modifications suggested were integrated into the final thematic analysis.

Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Coding was completed manually and with the aid of qualitative analysis software such as NVivo. Codes and themes were cross-verified between the questionnaire and interview data to identify convergence, divergence, and patterns relevant to the research questions.

Throughout the analysis, reflexive journaling and audit trails were maintained to document analytic decisions and enhance transparency. Thick and rich descriptions were developed to support transferability, and triangulation across data sources was used to ensure the findings were robust and well-substantiated. These procedures were designed to ensure rigorous, ethical, and replicable research practices while capturing the depth and complexity of participants' experiences in supporting student well-being in online environments.

### **Assumptions**

Assumptions in qualitative research are beliefs or conditions that are accepted as true without empirical proof for the purposes of planning and conducting a study. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2016), assumptions are necessary to frame the research design and guide methodological choices, and they reflect the researcher's expectations about the participants,

setting, and phenomena being studied. As such, this study was grounded in several underlying assumptions that support the research design and methodology.

First, it was assumed participants would respond to the questionnaire and interview questions honestly and thoughtfully. This assumption was necessary because the accuracy and depth of the findings rely on the participants' willingness to share their authentic experiences and perspectives (Lim, 2025). Given the voluntary nature of the study and the assurances of confidentiality, it was reasonable to expect participants would provide truthful and reflective responses. Second, it was assumed participants possess a sufficient level of self-awareness and recall to accurately reflect on their preparedness and experiences in supporting student well-being. This assumption was based on the eligibility requirement that participants must have at least two years of experience as full-time undergraduate educators in online learning environments, suggesting they were likely to have encountered and navigated relevant situations, which are reflective of the participants' lived experiences (Lim, 2025). Third, the study assumed the conceptual framework, Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, was an appropriate and effective lens through which to explore and interpret educators' approaches to student well-being. This assumption was supported by the model's widespread application in positive psychology and educational research as a multidimensional framework for understanding well-being. Fourth, it was assumed the chosen data collection methods, open-ended questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and member checking, were appropriate for capturing the rich, detailed qualitative data required to address the study's research questions. This approach was based on established qualitative research practices that emphasize the importance of triangulation and participant validation to enhance trustworthiness. Lastly, it was assumed the researcher would maintain reflexivity and minimize personal biases throughout the research process. This assumption was

addressed through the use of reflexive journaling and audit trails, which supported transparency and critical self-reflection during data collection and analysis (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). These assumptions provide the foundation for the study's credibility and rigor and were necessary to support meaningful and trustworthy interpretations of the data collected.

### **Limitations**

Limitations in qualitative research refer to the potential weaknesses or constraints in the study design, methods, or scope that may impact the credibility, transferability, or dependability of the findings (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). These limitations are typically outside the researcher's control but should be acknowledged to maintain transparency and allow for a more accurate interpretation of the results (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Several potential limitations may affect the scope and generalizability of this study.

First, as a single-site qualitative case study, the findings were contextually bound to one private university in the western United States and may not be generalizable to broader populations or other institutional settings. However, this limitation was mitigated through the use of thick and rich description, enabling readers to determine the transferability of the findings to their own contexts. Second, participant self-selection may introduce bias, as individuals who volunteer to participate may have a particular interest or experience related to student well-being that differs from those who choose not to participate. To address this limitation, the recruitment strategy was designed to reach a wide range of eligible faculty through institutional email lists and digital faculty spaces, increasing the diversity of perspectives among those who opt in. Third, participants' responses were based on self-report data, which may be influenced by memory recall limitations or social desirability bias. Social desirability bias refers to the tendency of participants to provide responses that are more socially acceptable rather than their

true opinions or behaviors, potentially leading to distorted conclusions in qualitative studies (Bispo Júnior, 2022). To mitigate this, the study uses multiple data sources (questionnaires and interviews) and member checking to cross-verify and confirm interpretations, improving the credibility and accuracy of the findings. Fourth, the study may be limited by the researcher's own biases or interpretations, particularly given the interpretive nature of qualitative analysis. This limitation was addressed through the use of reflexive journaling, audit trails, and the systematic application of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach to enhance transparency and accountability.

Finally, the use of virtual platforms for interviews may present challenges related to technological barriers or participant comfort with remote communication. To reduce this risk, participants were offered flexibility in scheduling, given clear instructions, and provided with technical support if needed. While these limitations are inherent in qualitative research, the study incorporates multiple strategies to mitigate their effects and enhance the trustworthiness and rigor of the findings.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are the boundaries or parameters that researchers establish to narrow the scope of a study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). These include decisions the researcher makes about the population, setting, research design, or theoretical framework in order to focus the study and make it manageable. Delimitations reflect the choices and justifications of the researcher and helped define what the study would and would not address (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This study included several deliberate boundaries that reflected the scope and focus of the research, each of which was grounded in the problem, purpose, and conceptual framework.

First, the study was delimited to full-time undergraduate educators at a single private university in the western United States. This boundary was intentional to allow for an in-depth, context-specific exploration of faculty experiences within the same institutional culture and support structures. Limiting the setting ensures alignment with the study's purpose of understanding educator preparedness within the "whole human education" framework implemented by this university. Second, the study focused exclusively on undergraduate faculty who have been employed at the institution for at least two years and who report having attempted to support student well-being in an online learning context. This delimitation ensured participants had adequate experience to speak meaningfully about their preparedness, perceptions, and practices. It also aligned with the conceptual framework (PERMA model) and research questions, which sought to explore detailed insights into how faculty support students' social, emotional, and mental well-being through sustained engagement and institutional alignment. Third, the study emphasized qualitative data collection through open-ended questionnaires and semi-structured interviews, rather than quantitative surveys or comparative statistical analysis. This methodological choice reflected the study's intent to gain deep, descriptive insights rather than measure variables across large samples. This delimitation was supported by literature that recommends case study and interview-based inquiry for exploring complex, context-sensitive phenomena like educator preparedness and student well-being (Yin, 2018). Lastly, the study was framed through the lens of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model rather than alternative theories of well-being, such as Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs or Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory. This conceptual delimitation reflected the model's alignment with the study's focus on multidimensional well-being and supports its use in both the development of interview questions and analysis of faculty strategies to foster positive emotion,

engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment. These delimitations were carefully selected to enhance the coherence, manageability, and relevance of the study while ensuring alignment with the problem statement, purpose, and research questions. They also supported the application of the PERMA model as a framework for generating meaningful insights into faculty experiences in addressing student well-being in online education.

### **Summary**

Section 2 presents the methodological foundation of this qualitative exploratory single case study, which examined how full-time undergraduate educators at a private university in the western United States perceived and described their preparedness to support student well-being in online learning environments. The qualitative methodology aligned with the study's goal of exploring rich, context-dependent human experiences. A single case study design provided in-depth insight into a bounded system, one institution actively engaged in implementing a "whole human education" framework. This section justified the selection of qualitative research by contrasting it with quantitative and mixed methods approaches, emphasizing the appropriateness of an exploratory design for investigating complex and underexplored phenomena. The conceptual framework guiding this study was Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, which offered a multidimensional lens for understanding well-being and aligns with the study's focus on emotional, social, and psychological dimensions of student support.

Sampling procedures involved purposive and convenience sampling to identify 10 to 15 eligible participants with relevant experience. The data collection instruments, an open-ended online questionnaire and a semi-structured interview protocol, were developed by the researcher, reviewed by an expert panel, and refined through field testing. Data was collected in three phases and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis, supported by NVivo

software. To enhance credibility, transferability, and trustworthiness, the study incorporated triangulation, member checking, audit trails, reflexive journaling, and thick description.

The section also discusses key assumptions, including participant honesty, recall ability, and the suitability of the PERMA model as a conceptual lens. Potential limitations, such as site specificity, self-selection bias, and the use of self-report data, were acknowledged alongside strategies for mitigation. Finally, the delimitations of the study clearly defined its boundaries and reinforced alignment with the research purpose and questions. Collectively, the design decisions outlined in this section established the methodological rigor necessary to explore the experiences and perceptions of faculty in supporting student well-being in online higher education. This foundation enabled the study to generate meaningful insights that inform institutional practice, faculty development, and future research.

### **Section 3: Findings, Implications, and Recommendations**

The problem addressed in this study was that while faculty and staff often recognize the importance of supporting student well-being, many report feeling unprepared to effectively identify and address student well-being needs (Constantinou et al., 2022), defined in this study as students' psychological, emotional, and relational needs, which can impede the faculty's ability to support well-being among their students (Ray et al., 2024). In a university setting where institutional resources such as advising, mental health services, and academic support are allocated across multiple degree levels, ranging from associate to doctoral programs, undergraduate students may experience uneven access to well-being support mechanisms, resulting in distinct well-being needs that require more intentional and targeted attention. The purposes of this qualitative exploratory single case study were to explore the preparedness and experiences of full-time undergraduate educators in addressing students' overall well-being in online learning environments and identify effective strategies and skills to address students' well-being needs.

This section presents a discussion of trustworthiness, the findings related to undergraduate educators' perceptions of their preparedness to address students' overall well-being in an online learning environment, and a summary of the study's results. The findings were organized and analyzed through the lens of Seligman's (2011) PERMA model, with attention to how educators perceive and enact practices related to positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment in online instruction. The research questions were addressed using data obtained from an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with full-time undergraduate educators, focusing on their experiences, perceived preparedness,

and approaches to supporting students' overall well-being within a post-secondary online learning context.

Trustworthiness in qualitative research refers to the degree to which a study's findings are credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable, ensuring that the results accurately represent participants' experiences rather than researcher bias (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To ensure the quality and rigor of this qualitative exploratory single case study, trustworthiness was established through strategies to address each one of the four criteria individually. These criteria are widely accepted benchmarks for evaluating qualitative research and were first identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as alternatives to validity and reliability within positivist traditions. Within a constructivist qualitative framework, trustworthiness emphasizes confidence in the interpretations drawn from the data and the extent to which findings authentically represent participants' experiences and perspectives.

Ensuring credibility was also a critical component of this study. Credibility in qualitative research refers to the extent to which the findings accurately represent participants' perspectives and experiences, as perceived by the participants themselves and those familiar with the research context (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). One strategy used to enhance credibility was methodological consistency across participants. All participants completed the same open-ended questionnaire and participated in a semi-structured interview using the same virtual platform, with questions asked in the same order for each participant. This consistency supported comparability across responses while still allowing participants flexibility to elaborate on their lived experiences. Consistent data collection procedures have been identified as an important strategy for strengthening credibility in qualitative inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility was further strengthened through method triangulation and transcript accuracy verification. Data were

collected using two methods, an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, allowing participants to express their perspectives across multiple formats. Method triangulation has been identified as a strategy for enhancing credibility by providing multiple lenses through which a phenomenon can be examined (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Following each interview, transcripts were shared with participants for review to ensure accuracy and completeness. Participants were invited to clarify, correct, or expand upon their responses, a process commonly referred to as member checking. Verbatim interview transcripts were emailed to each of the participants for review, and they were given the opportunity to request corrections or provide additional clarification. No participants requested changes or additions to their original responses. This was significant as member checking has been widely recognized as an effective strategy for enhancing credibility by validating the accuracy of participants' accounts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spall, 1998).

Dependability refers to the stability and reliability of the research process over time and the extent to which the inquiry process is logical, traceable, and clearly documented (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To support dependability, a systematic research protocol was followed throughout all phases of the study. Each stage of data collection and analysis was documented in detail, including participant recruitment, instrumentation, coding procedures, and theme development. Maintaining a clear separation between raw data and interpretive analysis further supported dependability by ensuring that findings were grounded in participants' responses rather than researcher assumptions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In qualitative research, an audit trail consists of detailed documentation of data collection procedures, analytic decisions, and reflective notes that enable transparency and allow readers to follow the progression from raw data to findings (Carcary, 2009; Ortlipp, 2008). An audit trail

was maintained to document analytic decisions and procedural steps throughout the research process. This included records of coding decisions, theme refinement, and alignment of findings with the research questions and the PERMA framework. Raw data, including questionnaire responses, interview recordings, and verbatim transcripts, were securely stored and preserved separately from analytic documents. In this study, analytic memos were written throughout the data analysis process to document initial impressions, emerging codes, and decisions related to theme development. Memos were used to record reflections on patterns observed across questionnaire responses and interview transcripts, as well as to capture rationale for analytic decisions made during coding and theme refinement. These memos were maintained as part of the audit trail and reviewed throughout the analysis to support transparency and consistency in the analytic process. The use of analytic memoing is widely recognized as a strategy for enhancing transparency and rigor in qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Confirmability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which a study's findings are shaped by participants' responses rather than researcher bias, motivation, or personal interest (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability was addressed by ensuring that the findings reflected participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's personal viewpoints or predispositions. Reflexive practices were intentionally incorporated throughout the study to acknowledge and monitor potential researcher bias. Reflexive journaling allowed for ongoing examination of the researcher's positionality and assumptions, supporting analytic neutrality (Berger, 2015; Ortlipp, 2008). Throughout the data collection and analysis process, reflexive journal entries were maintained to document the researcher's reflections, reactions to participant responses, and emerging thoughts related to coding and theme development. These entries were used to

acknowledge potential biases, monitor assumptions, and intentionally bracket personal perspectives during data analysis. Reflexive journaling also supported transparency by recording how analytic decisions evolved over time and was maintained as part of the overall audit trail. In addition, the use of direct participant quotations in the presentation of findings strengthened confirmability by allowing readers to trace interpretations directly back to the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Transferability in qualitative research refers to the extent to which a study's findings can be applied to other contexts or settings, based on the provision of sufficient descriptive detail to allow readers to determine relevance (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Transferability was addressed through the provision of rich, thick descriptions of the research context, participants, and findings. Detailed descriptions of the institutional setting, participant roles, and instructional context allow readers to determine the extent to which the findings may be applicable to other post-secondary online learning environments. Rather than seeking statistical generalization, this study supports analytic transferability by providing sufficient contextual detail for readers to assess relevance to their own settings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness of the data was addressed throughout the data collection and analysis process. Credibility was supported through triangulation using both questionnaire and interview data, as well as transcript accuracy verification through participant review. Transferability was addressed by providing detailed descriptions of the research context and participant characteristics to allow readers to assess applicability to other settings. Dependability was supported through the use of a consistent data collection protocol and detailed documentation of analytic procedures, allowing the study to be replicated in similar contexts. Confirmability was

addressed through reflexive journaling, analytic memoing, and the maintenance of an audit trail to ensure that findings were grounded in participant data rather than researcher bias.

In qualitative case study research, data from multiple sources are analyzed independently to preserve the integrity of participants' voices within each data source before points of convergence are examined (Yin, 2017). In this study, triangulation was achieved by analyzing data from the open-ended questionnaire and the semi-structured interviews as distinct datasets prior to comparison. This approach allowed themes to emerge organically within each method while maintaining focus on participants' perspectives. Guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach to thematic analysis, responses from the open-ended questionnaire were first reviewed and open coded to identify patterns across participants' written responses. This resulted in the identification of 66 initial codes. The initial codes were then examined for conceptual overlap and consolidated into 36 secondary codes, across eight different categories, which were used to establish eight preliminary themes.

I then applied the same process to analyze data from the 18-question semi-structured in-person (i.e., virtual) interview conducted with each participant. The interviews resulted in 58 initial codes that were reviewed for duplication and overlap. As overlap was identified, the initial codes were then collapsed into 32 secondary codes, which provided five categories and 11 preliminary themes (Appendix F).

The questionnaire-derived themes were subsequently compared with the themes generated from the interview data to examine areas of alignment and divergence. Analyzing each data source separately before comparison supported methodological rigor and strengthened credibility by ensuring that the findings reflected consistent patterns across multiple forms of participant data rather than reliance on a single source (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Yin, 2017).

Collectively, these strategies contributed to the overall trustworthiness of the study by ensuring that the findings were credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferable. Through consistent data collection procedures, transparent documentation, reflexive analysis, and participant verification, this study provides a rigorous and trustworthy account of undergraduate educators' preparedness to address students' overall well-being in an online learning environment.

## **Findings**

This section provides a descriptive summary of the demographic characteristics of the participants who contributed data to this study. Participants were full-time undergraduate educators teaching in an online post-secondary learning environment. Demographic information was collected through the open-ended questionnaire and was used solely to describe the sample and contextualize the findings.

Demographic variables collected included instructional role, years of teaching experience in higher education, years of experience teaching online, academic discipline, and prior training related to student well-being or mental health support. To protect participant confidentiality, no potentially identifying information was reported, and demographic characteristics were not aligned with individual participant codes. A summary of participant demographic characteristics is presented in aggregate form below, in Table 1.

This qualitative exploratory single case study examined undergraduate educators' perceptions of their preparedness to address students' overall well-being in an online learning environment. Data was collected using an open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews with full time undergraduate educators. The purpose of the study was to explore educators' experiences, perceived preparedness, and approaches to supporting student well-being through the lens of the PERMA model.

Participants for this qualitative exploratory single case study were recruited using a purposive sampling approach. Eligibility criteria required participants to be full-time undergraduate educators teaching in an online post-secondary learning environment. Recruitment materials were distributed electronically and included a brief description of the study purpose, participation requirements, and voluntary nature of involvement. Interested individuals were directed to review the informed consent information prior to participating in the study. All recruitment and participation procedures were conducted in accordance with institutional review board approval.

A total of 17 participants completed the 10-question open-ended questionnaire. Upon completion of the questionnaire, participants were invited to voluntarily participate in a follow-up semi-structured interview. Of the 17 participants who completed the questionnaire, 11 elected to schedule and complete the semi-structured interview (see Table 1 below). The interviews were conducted using a virtual platform and followed a consistent interview protocol. Questionnaire responses and interview data were used collectively to address the research questions and inform the findings presented in this section.

Table 1  
*Description of Participants*

<b>Participant “Name”</b>	<b>Gender</b>	<b>Years Teaching Online</b>	<b>Specialization</b>
Cassandra	Female	13	Biological Science
Charlie	Female	16	Psychology
Claudia	Female	22	Cybersecurity
Gavin	Male	25	Mathematics
Geraldine	Female	24	Education
Howard	Male	25	English
Jason	Male	5	Law
Mia	Female	25	Public Affairs
Michael	Male	17	Org. Leadership
Ryan	Male	15	Digital Media
Sherry	Female	6	Paralegal Studies

Prior to the start of the interview, participants were informed that all information shared through the data collection process would be kept confidential. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using a virtual platform and were audio recorded with participant consent. Each interview lasted between 35 and 55 minutes, depending on the depth of participants' responses and the need for follow-up clarification. Participants were asked 18 open ended interview questions, with additional probing questions used as needed to clarify responses or encourage elaboration. At the conclusion of each interview, participants were invited to share any additional thoughts or experiences related to their preparedness to address students' overall well-being in an online learning environment. Any additional information provided was documented and included in the data analysis.

The semi-structured interview questions were designed to elicit undergraduate educators' perceptions, experiences, and approaches related to supporting students' overall well-being in online instruction. Prior to beginning each interview, time was dedicated to establishing rapport and addressing any participant questions regarding the purpose of the study and how the data would be used. Each interview began with a brief introduction and reassurance that all responses would remain confidential and would not be linked to identifying information. Participants were informed that the interview questions were designed to expand upon and clarify their responses from the open-ended questionnaire. Questionnaire responses were available to the researcher during the interview to support continuity and to allow participants to reference or clarify earlier responses if needed.

All interview responses were transcribed verbatim, including follow-up questions and participant elaborations as they occurred naturally during the interview process. Following each interview, transcripts were reviewed multiple times to ensure accuracy and clarity of the data

collected. Participants were also invited to clarify, correct, or expand upon their responses, a process commonly referred to as member checking, and widely recognized as an effective strategy for enhancing credibility by validating the accuracy of participants' accounts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spall, 1998). As data collection progressed, responses were compared across participants to identify patterns and assess data saturation. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the interview and analysis process to document procedural decisions, emerging observations, and reflections related to the research process. Reflexive journaling supported ongoing awareness of potential researcher bias and contributed to a systematic and transparent analytic process.

Data analysis followed an inductive thematic analysis process. Questionnaire responses and interview transcripts were reviewed, coded, and analyzed to identify patterns and themes related to the research questions. Findings are organized by research questions and are presented descriptively without interpretation or discussion.

### ***Research Question 1***

How do full-time undergraduate faculty in post-secondary online educational environments at a private university describe supporting student overall well-being? Research Question 1 examined undergraduate educators' perceptions of their preparedness to support students' overall well-being within an online learning context. Data collected from the open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews revealed multiple ways in which participants described their sense of preparedness. Analysis of the data resulted in the identification of several preliminary themes related to educators' perceived preparedness. After further review and consolidation across both data sources, four final themes emerged that addressed Research Question 1. These themes describe how participants conceptualized preparedness through

relational practices, individualized connection, the creation of safe learning environments, and attention to the needs of the whole adult learner.

### **Theme 1: Building connection, engagement, and community via relationships and collaboration**

Participants consistently described their preparedness to address student well-being in an online learning environment in terms of their ability to build connection, engagement, and a sense of community through intentional relationships and collaborative practices. Educators emphasized that fostering relationships among students, as well as between faculty and students, was foundational to supporting student well-being in online courses.

Nine participants described collaboration and interaction as central to creating a sense of community in the online classroom. Eight participants reported intentionally designing opportunities for students to engage with one another through discussion, group work, and shared learning activities. These participants (Howard, Mia, Jason, Cassandra, Charlie, Gavin, Claudia, and Sherry) consistently described these collaborative practices as deliberate instructional choices aimed at reducing feelings of isolation and fostering shared learning experiences among online students.

Howard described viewing his instructional role as collaborative rather than authoritative, stating, “I try, as far as possible, to think of my role as really a collaborator...working together to try and enjoy and appreciate and understand the texts in a more collaborative way.” Mia similarly emphasized interaction as essential to community building, noting, “It’s really about creating that sense that we’re all working through this together, even though we’re online.” Jason described intentionally structuring discussions to encourage peer interaction, explaining that discussions were designed to allow students “to respond to each other, build on ideas, and see that they’re not

alone in their thinking.” Together, these accounts illustrate how participants framed collaboration and peer interaction as central strategies for fostering connection and shared learning in the online classroom.

Two participants reinforced these perspectives by describing specific strategies used to promote collaboration. Cassandra described intentionally designing small group activities early in the course, explaining that early interaction helped students feel more connected, stating that “once they’ve worked with a few classmates, it doesn’t feel as isolating anymore.” Jason similarly described using recurring group assignments, noting that “seeing the same peers throughout the course makes it feel more like a community instead of a collection of individuals.” Together, these accounts highlight how intentionally structured collaborative activities were used to reduce isolation and foster a sense of connection among students in online courses.

Two participants expressed that collaborative interaction helped students normalize academic challenges. Charlie described discussion boards as spaces where students realized shared experiences, explaining that “students often see others asking the same questions they have, and that seems to ease their stress.” Sherry echoed this observation, stating that collaborative discussions helped students recognize that “they’re not the only ones struggling or unsure.” These accounts illustrate how peer interaction was used to help students contextualize challenges and reduce feelings of isolation within the online learning environment.

Two participants also described collaboration as a way to counteract the transactional nature of online learning. Gavin explained that without interaction, online courses can feel one directional, stating that “if students are only submitting work to me, it doesn’t feel like a class.” Similarly, Claudia described intentionally designing collaborative activities to create a sense of

shared space, noting that “interaction is what makes the course feel alive instead of isolating.” This emphasis on collaboration was frequently seen as a link to reducing isolation and increasing engagement in the online classroom.

Ten participants described the importance of faculty presence in building connection and trust in the online classroom by being visible, accessible, and actively involved in course interactions as central components of fostering a sense of community. These participants consistently described faculty presence as an intentional practice rather than a passive role, particularly in online environments where physical distance can create feelings of disconnection.

Sherry described the importance of relationship building, stating, “At the end of the day, the most important thing is to have a relationship with our students...there are lots of creative ways to do that online.” Sherry also emphasized intentional availability, noting, “Being accessible is just super important...students have access to my cell phone, I encourage them to text, I do a lot of office hours.” Similarly, Claudia emphasized instructor visibility, explaining, “Students need to feel that the instructor is part of the course, not just someone grading from a distance.” Collectively, this exemplifies how participants emphasized relationship building, accessibility, and instructor presence as key components of fostering connection and trust in online learning environments.

Two other participants described faculty presence as a way to signal care and support to students. Michael explained that regular communication helped establish trust, stating, “When students see that I’m responding quickly and showing up consistently, they’re more willing to reach out when they’re struggling.” Cassandra echoed this perspective, noting that presence helped humanize the online experience, explaining that “students need reminders that there’s a real person on the other side who cares about how they’re doing.” In these examples, faculty

presence functioned as a visible indicator of care that encouraged trust and openness in the online learning environment.

Two participants emphasized the importance of active engagement in discussions as a form of presence. Gavin described intentionally participating in discussion boards, stating, “If I’m not in the discussions, students notice. When I jump in, ask questions, or respond to them, it changes how engaged they are.” Jason similarly noted that instructor participation created a sense of shared space, explaining, “It feels more like a community when students see me interacting alongside them instead of just evaluating their posts.” These examples show how instructor participation in discussions contributed to a shared learning environment and reinforced faculty presence within the course.

A couple of participants also described availability outside of course content as critical to building trust. Charlie shared that offering flexible office hours helped students feel supported, stating, “Some students wouldn’t ever come to office hours if they were rigid. Being flexible makes them feel like I’m actually there for them.” Mia described proactive outreach as part of their presence, explaining that “even a quick check in email lets students know they haven’t been forgotten.” This emphasis on accessibility beyond instructional tasks highlights how participants used availability to reinforce trust and demonstrate ongoing support for students.

Two participants highlighted that faculty presence was especially important during moments of student difficulty or disengagement. Ryan explained, “When students start to pull back, that’s when presence matters most. Reaching out shows them they’re not invisible.” Howard similarly described presence as a stabilizing factor, stating, “Just knowing the instructor is paying attention seems to help students feel more secure and connected.” In these situations,

faculty presence was described as a stabilizing influence that helped students feel noticed and supported during periods of challenge or withdrawal.

Across participants, faculty presence was consistently described as a foundational element in building connection and trust in online learning environments. Through visibility, accessibility, and active engagement, participants described intentionally creating presence as a way to foster meaningful relationships and support a sense of community among online students. However, one participant expressed caution regarding the extent and boundaries of instructor availability. Geraldine emphasized the importance of maintaining professional limits while still remaining supportive and responsive to students saying, “There has to be a clear line, so students don’t come to rely on the instructor for things that go beyond the course...being present doesn’t necessarily mean being available at all hours.” Geraldine also stated, “Students need to know you care, but they also need to build independence,” noting that too much instructor involvement could reduce opportunities for peer support and self-efficacy. This divergent perspective does not reject the importance of faculty presence but instead highlighted a more measured approach, emphasizing intentional boundaries as a component of maintaining trust, clarity, and long-term instructional effectiveness in online learning environments.

In addition to structured collaboration, participants described informal relationship building as an essential aspect of creating community in online learning environments. Cassandra reported reaching out to students individually, engaging in personal conversations early in the course, and encouraging informal interaction as ways to establish familiarity and trust. These informal practices were described as intentional efforts to humanize the online classroom and create conditions in which students felt comfortable engaging with both the instructor and their peers. Cassandra went on to describe how she prioritizes early individual

outreach, stating, “Every class I teach, I make a personal phone call and have a personal phone call with every student...so I have some familiarity with students and a sense of where they see themselves.” Cassandra explained that these early conversations helped establish rapport and reduced barriers to communication later in the course.

Geraldine similarly emphasized relationship development as foundational to trust and early awareness of student needs, explaining, “You’ve got to develop that relationship in order for you to maybe detect problems that would otherwise go unfounded.” This participant described informal conversations as critical to recognizing when students might be struggling academically or personally.

Two participants described relationship building as part of their instructional responsibility. Jason stated, “That’s my job...to get to know my students,” noting that without intentional effort, students could easily feel invisible in online courses. Mia echoed this perspective, explaining that “if students don’t feel known, they’re less likely to reach out or participate.” These comments highlight relationship building as an intentional instructional practice that supports student visibility, engagement, and willingness to seek support in online learning environments.

Two other participants described using informal check-ins to establish trust early in the course. Michael shared that sending personalized messages helped students feel acknowledged, stating, “Even a short message asking how they’re doing makes a difference.” Claudia described initiating casual conversations at the beginning of the term, explaining that “those early interactions set the tone and make later communication feel more natural.” By initiating informal contact early on, participants are laying a relational foundation that supported trust and ongoing communication throughout the course.

Sherry and Gavin also noted that informal relationship building helped students feel more comfortable engaging with peers. Sherry explained that when students felt supported by the instructor, “They’re more willing to speak up and interact with others.” Similarly, Gavin described how individual outreach contributed to a sense of safety, stating that “once students feel seen by the instructor, they seem more open in discussions.” This suggests that informal relationship building extended beyond instructor–student interactions and supported more open peer engagement within the online classroom.

Cassandra and Howard emphasized that these informal interactions were especially important in online environments where spontaneous connections are limited. Cassandra explained, “Online students don’t have those casual moments before or after class, so you have to create them.” Howard similarly noted that informal relationship building helped bridge the distance inherent in online learning, explaining that “those small personal interactions make the course feel more connected.” These accounts show that participants described informal interactions as intentional substitutes for the spontaneous connections typically present in face-to-face settings.

Across participants, informal relationship building was consistently described as a key strategy for establishing familiarity, trust, and comfort in online classrooms. Through individual outreach and personal interaction, participants described intentionally fostering relationships that supported student engagement and contributed to a stronger sense of community.

Six participants also discussed the role of discussion and interaction in fostering a collaborative learning environment. Cassandra, Claudia, Howard, Mia, Michael, and Ryan all mentioned emphasizing discussion as a learning activity rather than solely an assessment tool. Claudia said, “Students will often comment that they liked the discussions...they had been

anxious about whether they belonged back in college, and then they realized they were in a classroom with a bunch of other people just like themselves. That really enhanced their sense of belonging.” Howard noted, “I really try to present the discussions as learning activities, not really assessment activities, and do whatever I can to encourage them to interact with one another and with me.” Michael and Cassandra similarly described discussions as spaced for shared meaning making, practice, and interaction. These findings emphasize that framing discussions in this way encouraged participation and supported a sense of shared learning.

Although Sherry focused on course structure and student autonomy over relational or collaborative practices, the majority of participants described building connection, engagement, and community through relationships and collaboration as central to their approach to online teaching. As such, building connection, engagement, and community through relationships and collaboration emerged as a central way educators described feeling equipped to support students’ overall well-being in online courses.

## **Theme 2: Helping students feel seen and heard by connecting with them individually and providing encouragement**

Nine participants frequently described their preparedness to address student well-being in terms of their ability to connect with students on an individual level and help them feel seen, heard, and valued within the online learning environment. Claudia, Michael, Cassandra, Gavin, Howard, Charlie, Mia, Geraldine, and Sherry also emphasized that individualized communication, intentional outreach, and encouragement were central to supporting student well-being in online courses.

Eight participants described one-to-one outreach as a primary way of helping students feel acknowledged and supported. Sherry, Claudia, Michael, Cassandra, Geraldine, Howard,

Charlie, and Mia described reaching out individually through email, phone calls, text messages, and one-on-one Zoom meetings, particularly when students appeared disengaged or encountered challenges. Sherry explained, “If I notice they’re missing work or not attending class... I will follow up with them,” emphasizing individualized outreach. Claudia similarly described frequent personal communication, noting, “They like interacting with me, and so I get to know them.” Charlie described offering individual meetings, stating, “I also welcome students to... a one-on-one Zoom meeting or phone call.” Cassandra emphasized early personal contact, explaining, “Every class I teach, I make a personal phone call...so I have some familiarity with students.” Taken together, these accounts illustrate how individualized outreach was used to help students feel recognized, supported, and personally connected within the online learning environment.

Three participants reported intentionally reaching out to students through personal messages, phone calls, and virtual meetings to establish familiarity and build trust, particularly early in the course. Cassandra explained, “Every class I teach, I make a personal phone call and have a personal phone call with every student...so I have some familiarity with students and a sense of where they see themselves.” Ryan similarly emphasized the importance of personal recognition, stating, “I try to create that environment where they feel seen, feel heard, not just trying to bridge that gap when it’s in the online sphere.” Geraldine described using individual outreach as a way to signal care and attention, noting, “Sometimes it’s just a quick message saying, ‘Hey, I noticed you haven’t been around. Are you okay?’ and that alone opens the door.” These accounts illustrate how participants used individualized outreach to establish connection and help students feel personally recognized in the online learning environment.

Seven participants emphasized responsiveness and availability as essential to helping students feel heard and supported in online learning environments. Three participants specifically

described making themselves accessible through multiple communication channels and responding promptly to student outreach. Cassandra stated, “The worst thing for a student is to struggle to reach out and not get a response...things just build, and it can be really bad. So, I respond as quickly as possible, so they know that I’m listening.” Charlie highlighted the balance between availability and respect for adult learners, explaining, “I want to be available, but I don’t want to hover...I check in if I haven’t heard from them, just to make sure they’re okay.” Michael similarly described responsiveness as a signal of care, noting, “If a student reaches out and hears back quickly, they know they matter.” Collectively, these accounts show how timely responses and intentional accessibility were used to communicate attentiveness and reinforce students’ sense of being supported in online courses.

Additional two participants reinforced these perspectives by describing responsiveness as a deliberate strategy for acknowledging students as individuals. Sherry described proactively following up when students disengaged, explaining, “If I notice they’re missing work or not attending class...I will follow up with them,” emphasizing the importance of timely outreach to signal support. This participant noted that prompt communication often encouraged students to respond and reengage. Claudia similarly emphasized consistent and timely interaction, stating, “I interact all the time...so I get to know them,” highlighting how regular responsiveness helped students feel seen and acknowledged. Claudia further noted that students explicitly expressed appreciation for ongoing communication, describing encouragement emails as meaningful forms of support.

Three participants described availability across multiple channels as particularly important in online environments. Charlie explained that offering one-to-one conversations increased students’ comfort in reaching out, stating, “I also welcome students to, if they want to

talk to me one-on-one...a one-on-one Zoom meeting or phone call,” describing accessibility as an intentional component of presence and support. Ryan described responsiveness as part of a broader effort to reduce distance in online learning, explaining, “It’s more about just checking in with them...making them feel seen, feel heard,” and emphasized that timely replies helped bridge the relational gap inherent in online instruction. Similarly, Geraldine highlighted the importance of multi-channel accessibility, stating, “I think being accessible is just super important...students have access to my cell phone. I encourage them to text. Plus, I do a lot of office hours.” Taken together, these accounts illustrate how offering multiple avenues for communication helped reduce perceived distance and supported connection in online learning environments.

Across these accounts, participants consistently framed responsiveness and accessibility as key mechanisms for communicating attentiveness and support. Through prompt replies, proactive check-ins, and availability across communication channels, participants described intentionally signaling to students that their concerns mattered and that support was readily accessible in the online classroom.

Nine participants described using supportive language, encouragement, and affirming communication as central to supporting students, while also acknowledging persistence and growth. Ryan explained, “I always try to start with something positive and end with something positive...I really feel like a lot of what we’re doing is just, rah, rah, go, go team, go, you’ve got this.” Geraldine shared an example of reframing students’ academic experiences, stating, “You had the courage and the wherewithal to do those starts...instead of thinking of it as something that set you back, it really is what propelled you forward.” Claudia similarly emphasized

affirmation, noting, “Sometimes students just need to hear that they’re doing better than they think they are.”

Two additional participants reinforced the importance of encouragement and affirming communication. Claudia described providing ongoing encouragement through regular outreach, stating, “I kept sending out emails every week...he said your encouragement really helped him.” Geraldine emphasized affirming feedback as a way to reinforce confidence and persistence, explaining, “Students really value feedback...I give a lot of feedback, maybe even too much, but I want them to feel successful.” These examples demonstrate how participants used encouragement and affirming communication to reinforce confidence and persistence. These examples demonstrate how participants used encouragement and affirming communication to reinforce confidence and persistence.

Six participants described attentive listening as essential to better understand students’ experiences, as well as helping students feel seen and heard. Cassandra stated, “Sometimes what students need is somebody who listens to them...just knowing that someone is paying attention makes a difference.” Geraldine described being intentional about listening, noting, “I really try to be an active listener...so I have a sense of who my students are.” Jason also emphasized listening as foundational, explaining, “If you don’t really hear what students are saying, you can miss what they actually need.” Similarly, Ryan emphasized listening as a way of acknowledging students’ experiences, stating, “It’s more about just checking in with them...making them feel seen, feel heard.” These accounts highlight how attentive listening was used to deepen understanding and strengthen individual connections with students.

While the majority of participants emphasized individualized outreach, responsiveness, encouragement, and attentive listening as central to helping students feel seen and heard, Sherry

again focused more heavily on providing structured course resources and clear expectations rather than personalized communication. Despite this sole divergence, helping students feel seen and heard through individualized connection and encouragement emerged as a primary way educators described feeling prepared to support students' overall well-being in online learning environments.

### **Theme 3: Establishing safe and supportive online classrooms by creating a respectful and comfortable environment**

Participants described their preparedness to address student well-being in terms of their ability to establish safe and supportive online classrooms where students felt respected, comfortable, and secure engaging with course content and peers. Faculty members emphasized that creating a respectful tone, setting clear expectations for interaction, and intentionally fostering inclusive and nonjudgmental spaces were essential to supporting student well-being in online learning environments.

Nine participants described intentionally creating respectful and inclusive classroom climates as foundational to establishing safety and comfort in online courses. This was done by modeling respectful communication, setting clear expectations for discourse, and intervening when necessary to maintain a supportive environment. Geraldine explained, "I'm very clear from the beginning that this is a respectful space...we can disagree, but we do it respectfully." Cassandra similarly emphasized tone-setting, noting, "I think students take their cues from us. If we model respect and kindness, they're more likely to do the same with each other." Michael described being proactive in reinforcing expectations, stating, "I don't assume students just know how to interact online...I spell it out and reinforce it throughout the course." Collectively, these

comments reflect how participants intentionally established classroom norms to promote safety, respect, and a sense of belonging in online learning environments.

Two additional participants reinforced the importance of intentionally establishing respectful norms. Howard emphasized respect and comfort as foundational, stating, “You want them to feel comfortable in that class setting...that they are respected, treated respectfully, and that they’re enjoying it.” Mia similarly highlighted psychological safety, explaining, “Students feel comfortable in that learning environment...they feel comfortable sharing in discussions, and they don’t feel like they’re being attacked.” These accounts reflect how participants intentionally established respectful norms to support a sense of safety and belonging.

Eight participants described creating environments where students felt comfortable participating and expressing themselves without fear of judgment, specifically emphasizing reducing anxiety around participation, normalizing questions and uncertainty, and encouraging open dialogue. Mia explained, “I really want students to feel like it’s okay to speak up, even if they’re not sure they’re right.” Ryan echoed this sentiment, stating, “I tell them all the time, this is a learning space...you’re not expected to be perfect.” Claudia described intentionally reassuring students, saying, “I remind them that this is a safe place to try things out and make mistakes.” Similarly, Jason emphasized psychological safety as essential to participation, explaining, “If we do it right, students will feel comfortable in that learning environment...they’ll feel comfortable sharing in discussions, and they won’t feel like they’re being attacked.” These accounts illustrate how participants viewed psychological safety as essential to encouraging engagement and supporting student well-being.

Seven participants described actively facilitating and monitoring discussions and interactions to maintain supportive and respectful online spaces, addressing issues promptly, and

guiding interaction to ensure students felt supported. Cassandra explained, “I keep an eye on discussions, and if something feels off, I step in quickly.” Howard described active facilitation as a way to protect the learning environment, stating, “If students see that you’re paying attention, they feel safer engaging.” Jason similarly noted, “Sometimes it’s about redirecting a conversation, so it stays productive and respectful.” Gavin summed it up by saying, “I think students feel safer participating when they know the instructor is actually there, paying attention, and willing to step in if something starts to go sideways.” These accounts highlight how participants viewed active facilitation as a necessary component of sustaining safe and supportive online classrooms.

Six participants described clear structure, consistent communication, and predictable expectations as ways to reduce anxiety, while providing students with a sense of comfort and safety. Michael explained, “Students feel more comfortable when they know what to expect and where to find things.” Geraldine noted, “Consistency helps students relax a little...they know I’m going to show up the same way each week.” Charlie similarly emphasized predictability, stating, “It’s about creating an environment where nothing feels like a surprise.” These practices were described as helping students feel more secure and supported in the online learning environment.

Although the majority of participants emphasized the importance of intentionally creating safe, inclusive, and supportive online learning environments, two participants expressed caution regarding the extent to which faculty should manage classroom climate. These participants acknowledged the value of psychological safety and respectful interaction but emphasized the importance of balancing facilitation with allowing students to navigate disagreement and discomfort independently. Geraldine noted that while consistency, clear expectations, and

respectful norms were essential, faculty should strive to “Stay in their role as teacher...they do not need to step into the roles of becoming a counselor.” She also stated, “students also need space to work through differences on their own”, suggesting that excessive instructor intervention could limit opportunities for developing self-regulation and peer accountability. Jason emphasized that discomfort was not inherently negative, explaining that moments of uncertainty or tension could serve as meaningful learning opportunities when appropriately bounded. These divergent perspectives did not reject the importance of safety or inclusivity but instead highlighted a more measured approach to facilitation. Together, these views underscore that while intentional instructional practices are central to fostering supportive online environments, faculty differed in how actively they believed instructors should intervene to maintain comfort and safety.

#### **Theme 4: Understanding and supporting the whole adult learner through faculty presence, empathy, and flexibility**

Nine participants described relying on behavioral and engagement-based indicators to recognize potential signs of student distress in online courses, and emphasized paying close attention to missed assignments, sudden disengagement, changes in communication tone, and withdrawal from discussions as cues that a student might be experiencing challenges. Cassandra explained, “When a student suddenly disappears or stops turning things in, that’s usually my first red flag.” Michael similarly noted, “You can tell a lot from patterns...if someone who was engaged suddenly goes quiet, that tells me something’s going on.” Ryan described noticing subtle changes in communication, stating, “Sometimes it’s the tone of an email or the way they’re responding that lets me know something isn’t right.” Mia also emphasized the importance of recognizing patterns over time, explaining, “It’s not usually one thing by itself.

It's when you start to see a pattern, like missing work, not responding, dropping out of discussions, that's when I know something else is going on." Collectively, these accounts demonstrate how participants relied on ongoing observation of student behavior and engagement patterns to identify potential indicators of distress in online learning environments.

Two participants reinforced the importance of monitoring engagement patterns over time rather than isolated incidents. Michael described being attentive to discussion participation, explaining, "If you read their posts, you can detect certain challenges that they may have," and noted that consistent disengagement often prompted further attention. Howard similarly described noticing shifts in student tone and behavior within discussions, explaining that "just by the tone of their responses, they seem upset or angry," which signaled that something beyond course content might be affecting the student.

Sherry emphasized that recognizing distress required ongoing presence and familiarity with student engagement patterns. She described noticing changes through assignment submission and communication frequency, explaining that when engagement declined, it often indicated that "something is frustrating them or getting in the way." Across these accounts, participants described using sustained observation of engagement and behavior as a primary means of identifying potential student well-being concerns in online learning environments.

Eight participants described student communication, including direct disclosure and indirect cues within emails, discussion posts, and private messages, as an important source of information when recognizing distress. Geraldine, Claudia, Jason, Ryan, Sherry, and Michael specifically emphasized attending closely to both what students explicitly shared and how students communicated, noting that distress was often conveyed through tone, word choice, or shifts in communication style rather than direct statements. Geraldine stated, "Sometimes

students will just tell you what's going on if they feel safe enough to do so." Claudia described noticing indirect disclosures, noting, "They may not say it outright, but you can hear it in how overwhelmed they sound." Jason similarly emphasized careful listening, explaining, "You have to read between the lines sometimes...students don't always know how to say they're struggling." Taken together, these accounts highlight how participants relied on careful attention to student communication to identify distress that might not be explicitly disclosed.

Two participants reinforced the importance of attending to subtle communication cues. Ryan described noticing distress through brief or emotionally charged messages, explaining that "it's often not what they say, but how they say it," and noted that changes in tone frequently prompted follow up. Sherry similarly described recognizing distress through student emails, explaining that frustration or anxiety often surfaced in the language students used when reaching out about assignments or deadlines.

Two participants specifically emphasized that communication-based cues became more apparent through consistent interaction with students over time. Michael described recognizing concerns by closely reading discussion posts, stating that "if you read their posts, you can detect certain challenges that they may have," particularly when communication patterns shifted. Similarly, Ryan mentioned recognizing concerns through changes in written communication, stating, "You can usually tell when something's going on just by how their messages change...shorter responses, more frustration, or not responding at all." These accounts illustrate how participants drew on ongoing interaction with students to identify potential concerns, using communication patterns and shifts in expression as indicators that support might be needed.

Ten participants specifically mentioned using private outreach, including email, phone calls, and virtual meetings, as their primary response when they identified potential signs of

student distress. These participants emphasized discretion and intentional framing as essential to ensuring students felt supported rather than singled out or exposed. Cassandra explained, “I always reach out privately...I don’t want to call attention to it in front of others.” Geraldine described her approach, stating, “I’ll send a message just saying, ‘I noticed you haven’t been around. Are you okay?’ and let them take it from there.” Charlie emphasized the importance of discretion, noting, “It’s about making sure they feel supported, not exposed.” Ryan similarly described intentional framing, stating, “I always make sure it’s a private message and that it’s framed as concern, not discipline. I want them to know I’m reaching out because I care, not because they’re in trouble.” Sherry described following up individually when concerns arose, explaining that reaching out privately helped students feel safe responding without fear of judgment. Michael similarly emphasized one-to-one communication, stating that when issues were noticed, “we can reach out to them and say, hey, we’re here to help and assist you,” describing private outreach as an entry point for support. One participant specifically emphasized that private outreach allowed students to share concerns at their own pace. Charlie described offering individual conversations through phone or virtual meetings, explaining that private settings made students “more willing to open up about challenges.” Collectively, participants described private outreach as a deliberate strategy for responding to distress in ways that prioritize dignity, care, and respect for students’ privacy.

Seven participants described responding to student distress by combining empathy, flexibility, and referral to institutional support services when appropriate. Ryan, Michael, Geraldine, Cassandra, and Gavin described listening to students’ circumstances, offering flexibility with deadlines or expectations when possible, and connecting students with additional resources if concerns extended beyond the instructional role. Geraldine provided a detailed

account of how she approached these situations, emphasizing both care and ethical responsibility:

“One of the things that I was super sensitive to when I was Associate Dean of Students is that students don’t need to tell their stories and their personal stories to a bunch of people. We really need to be mindful of how we handle that. So, when a student had a need, connecting them right away to student wellness was important, because it meant they only had to tell their story one time, and it was confidential. I think that’s extremely important. At the same time, I want students to understand that asking for help isn’t a deficit. It’s a strength. So, when students come to me, I listen, I support them, but I’m also very intentional about connecting them to the right resource. I only need to know what I need to know, and then I pass that baton to someone who is qualified to help.”

This account illustrates how participants framed referral not as a withdrawal of support, but as an extension of care that balanced empathy with professional boundaries while ensuring students were connected to appropriate resources.

Ryan explained, “Sometimes just giving them a little grace makes all the difference.” Michael described balancing support and boundaries, stating, “I can listen and support them, but I also know when it’s time to connect them with someone who can help more.” Geraldine similarly noted, “If it’s something bigger than what I can handle, I make sure they know what resources are available.” These examples reflect how participants combined empathy with professional judgment, offering flexibility and support while recognizing when referral to additional resources was necessary.

Additional participants reinforced the importance of combining empathy with appropriate referrals. Cassandra described acknowledging students’ challenges while remaining mindful of

instructional boundaries, explaining that while they wanted students to feel supported, “there are limits,” and that connecting students to appropriate services was often the most responsible form of care. Gavin similarly emphasized referral as an extension of support rather than a withdrawal of care, explaining that helping students access resources ensured that students did not have to “tell their story multiple times” and could receive support from those best equipped to help.

Although the majority of participants described proactive recognition of distress signals and private outreach, a small number of participants emphasized maintaining instructional boundaries and expressed caution about interpreting disengagement as an indicator of student well-being concerns. Sherry described a more limited approach to recognizing distress, emphasizing student responsibility and academic structure rather than proactive monitoring, stating, “I try not to assume that disengagement means something personal is going on...students have to take responsibility for managing their own participation.” Similarly, Jason expressed hesitation about interpreting engagement patterns as signals of distress, noting, “I’m careful not to read too much into missed work or silence unless the student reaches out first.” These perspectives reflect a more reserved approach in which educators prioritized clear instructional roles and responded primarily to explicit student disclosure rather than initiating outreach based on perceived indicators of distress.

Collectively, the data shows a majority of the participant accounts emphasized the importance of recognizing student distress through careful observation of engagement patterns, communication cues, and academic behaviors. Most participants described responding through private outreach that prioritized discretion, empathy, and support, often combined with flexibility and referral to appropriate resources when needed. These practices reflect how participants

associated their preparedness to support student well-being with their ability to identify signs of distress and respond thoughtfully and appropriately within the online learning environment.

### ***Research Question 2***

How do full-time undergraduate educators in post-secondary online educational environments at a private university describe their preparedness to support students' overall well-being? Research Question 2 examined undergraduate educators' perceptions of their preparedness to address students' social, emotional, and mental well-being within an online learning context. Data collected from the open-ended questionnaire and semi-structured interviews provided insight into how participants understood, developed, and evaluated their readiness to support student well-being. Analysis of the data revealed multiple ways in which educators described their sense of preparedness, including how it was shaped by experience, professional boundaries, and access to institutional resources. Following further review and consolidation across both data sources, five final themes emerged that addressed Research Question 2. These themes reflect how participants conceptualized preparedness as an evolving process influenced by informal learning, role clarity, prior experience, and perceived needs for additional guidance or training.

### **Theme 5: Reducing the barriers to community-building by using discussions as connection spaces**

Five participants frequently described their preparedness to address student well-being in online learning environments as developing informally over time rather than through formal training or institutional preparation. Ryan, Howard, Cassandra, Charlie, and Geraldine all emphasized that their sense of readiness emerged through experience, trial and error, and

repeated interaction with students, often noting that they felt more prepared now than when they first began teaching online.

Two participants explicitly described feeling underprepared early in their online teaching careers. Ryan reflected on their initial readiness, stating that they did not feel “very well prepared” to address student well-being concerns and noted that much of their learning occurred while navigating situations as they arose. Similarly, Howard described preparedness as something that evolved gradually, explaining that understanding how to support students’ well-being came from “being in the classroom, seeing what works, and adjusting over time.” These accounts suggest that preparedness was not experienced as a fixed state, but rather as something that developed through continued practice in online teaching contexts.

Cassandra and Charlie emphasized that experience helped build confidence in recognizing and responding to student needs. Cassandra described becoming more comfortable addressing well-being concerns as they gained familiarity with student behaviors and engagement patterns in online courses, noting that experience helped them “know what to look for” and how to respond appropriately. Charlie similarly described relying on lessons learned from previous courses, explaining that repeated exposure to student challenges helped them feel “more capable of navigating similar situations in the future.” In these accounts, preparedness was closely tied to accumulated experience rather than formal instruction.

One participant provided a particularly detailed reflection on how preparedness developed over time through professional experience and reflection. Geraldine described how earlier roles and ongoing practice shaped their sense of readiness to support students’ well-being, explaining:

I don't think anyone ever feels fully prepared right away. A lot of what I learned came from experience, from being in situations where students needed support and figuring out how to respond appropriately. Over time, you start to recognize patterns, you become more confident, and you understand what your role really is in those moments.

This reflection illustrates how preparedness was experienced as an evolving process grounded in lived experience rather than formalized training.

Across these accounts, participants consistently framed preparedness as something developed informally through time, experience, and reflective practice in online teaching environments. Rather than pointing to specific training or institutional preparation, faculty described learning how to support student well-being by navigating real situations, building confidence gradually, and refining their responses based on prior experience.

#### **Theme 6: Recognizing distress signals and using private outreach and response to address appropriately**

Participants described their preparedness to address student well-being in terms of their ability to recognize signs of distress in online learning environments and respond through timely, private, and supportive outreach. Cassandra, Michael, Mia, Ryan, Claudia, and Jason emphasized that attentiveness to student engagement patterns, communication behaviors, and academic participation informed their decisions about when and how to initiate contact, and that preparedness involved knowing how to respond in ways that were respectful, discreet, and appropriate.

Three of those participants described relying on behavioral and engagement-based indicators to recognize potential signs of distress. Cassandra explained that changes in participation or assignment submission often prompted concern, stating, "When a student

suddenly disappears or stops turning things in, that's usually my first red flag." Michael similarly described paying attention to patterns over time, noting, "You can tell a lot from patterns...if someone who was engaged suddenly goes quiet, that tells me something's going on." Mia emphasized that recognizing distress required looking beyond isolated incidents, explaining, "It's not usually one thing by itself. It's when you start to see a pattern...missing work, not responding, dropping out of discussions, that's when I know something else is going on." These accounts reflect how participants associated preparedness with the ability to monitor engagement trends and interpret behavioral cues in online courses.

Three participants also described student communication as an important source of information when identifying distress, particularly when changes in tone or expression were present. Ryan explained that communication cues often signaled challenges before students explicitly disclosed concerns, stating, "Sometimes it's the tone of an email or the way they're responding that lets me know something isn't right." Claudia similarly described noticing indirect disclosures, noting, "They may not say it outright, but you can hear it in how overwhelmed they sound." Jason emphasized the importance of careful listening, explaining, "You have to read between the lines sometimes...students don't always know how to say they're struggling." Together, these accounts illustrate how preparedness involved attentiveness to both explicit and implicit communication cues when assessing student well-being.

Once a potential well-being concern was identified, participants consistently described private outreach as their primary response. Cassandra, Charlie, and Ryan emphasized discretion and intentional framing as key components of responding appropriately. Cassandra explained, "I always reach out privately...I don't want to call attention to it in front of others." Charlie highlighted the importance of privacy and tone, noting, "It's about making sure they feel

supported, not exposed.” Ryan similarly described framing outreach as care rather than discipline, stating, “I always make sure it’s a private message and that it’s framed as concern, not discipline. I want them to know I’m reaching out because I care.” These examples demonstrate how participants viewed preparedness as including the ability to initiate supportive outreach in ways that protected students’ dignity and privacy.

One participant provided a more detailed reflection on how preparedness informed both the recognition of distress and the decision to respond through private outreach. Geraldine described drawing on experience to interpret patterns of disengagement and emphasized the importance of responding thoughtfully rather than reactively. Geraldine explained:

You start to notice patterns over time. It’s rarely just one missed assignment or one quiet week. It’s when things start to change, and you can feel that something is different. When that happens, I’m very intentional about how I reach out. I don’t want to assume what’s going on, and I don’t want to put them on the spot. I’ll usually send a private message just saying, ‘I’ve noticed you haven’t been around as much, and I wanted to check in.’

That gives them space to respond if they want to, without feeling exposed or judged.

This account illustrates how preparedness involved not only recognizing potential indicators of well-being concerns but also exercising professional judgment in determining when and how to initiate supportive outreach in a manner that respected students’ privacy and autonomy.

Across participant accounts, preparedness to address student well-being was closely tied to the ability to recognize distress signals and respond through private, supportive outreach. Participants described using engagement patterns and communication cues to inform their

decisions, and emphasized discretion, care, and intentional framing as central to responding appropriately within the online learning environment.

### **Theme 7: Fostering meaning, motivation, growth, and accomplishment**

Participants described their preparedness to support student well-being as closely tied to their understanding of their instructional role and professional boundaries. Rather than viewing preparedness as the ability to address all aspects of student well-being, Ryan, Jason, Michael, Cassandra, and Howard emphasized knowing when to provide support, when to listen, and when to refer students to appropriate institutional resources.

Two participants described preparedness as being grounded in clarity about the limits of their role as instructors. Ryan emphasized the importance of avoiding assumptions and overreach, explaining that while he “wants to be supportive”, he was cautious about interpreting disengagement as a “personal issue” without explicit disclosure. Jason similarly described being intentional about staying within his instructional role, noting that he was “careful not to read too much into missed work or silence unless the student reaches out first.” These accounts reflect how preparedness involved restraint and professional judgment rather than constant intervention.

Two other participants described preparedness as recognizing when student needs extended beyond what could be addressed within the instructional role. Michael explained that while he was comfortable listening and offering support, he also understood the importance of connecting students to others when concerns became more complex, stating that he knew “when it’s time to connect them with someone who can help more.” Similarly, Cassandra emphasized that being prepared meant acknowledging limits, noting that while she wanted students to feel supported, there were clear boundaries around what she could reasonably provide as an

instructor. These perspectives highlight how preparedness is associated with an awareness of responsibility without assuming roles outside of one's expertise.

One participant offered a more explicit reflection on how role clarity contributed to preparedness. Howard described feeling more confident once they understood what was expected of them as faculty and what was not, explaining that preparedness came from "knowing what my role is and being okay with that," rather than feeling pressure to solve students' personal challenges. This account illustrates how clarity around role expectations reduced uncertainty and supported more confident responses to student well-being concerns.

Across participant accounts, preparedness was frequently described not as comprehensive expertise in student well-being, but as confidence rooted in role clarity and boundary awareness. And, although a majority of participants emphasized that understanding the scope of their responsibilities enabled them to respond appropriately, support students without overstepping, and make informed decisions about when referral or additional support was necessary, two participants emphasized maintaining clear instructional boundaries and expressed less concern about formal training related to student well-being. Jason and Ryan described preparedness as primarily rooted in maintaining clear instructional boundaries rather than developing new well-being related skills. Jason and Ryan emphasized that knowing when to remain within the instructional role and when to defer responsibility to institutional support services was sufficient for addressing student well-being concerns. Jason, for example, described being intentional about restraint, stating, "I'm careful not to read too much into missed work or silence unless the student reaches out first." Ryan similarly emphasized caution and role clarity, describing discomfort with overstepping rather than a lack of care for students. These perspectives reflect a more limited

conception of preparedness, in which confidence was grounded in boundary awareness rather than expanded training.

**Theme 8: Providing low-stakes, authentic engagement as opportunities for accomplishment**

Participants described their preparedness to address student well-being as closely connected to their awareness of institutional resources and support systems available to students. Michael, Cassandra, Geraldine, Howard, and Ryan provided unique perspectives which emphasized that knowing what services existed, how to access them, and when to connect students to those resources increased their confidence and clarity when responding to student well-being concerns.

Michael and Cassandra described feeling more prepared when they had a clear understanding of available support services and referral pathways. Michael explained that preparedness was less about having all the answers and more about knowing “who to connect students with when something is beyond what I can handle.” Cassandra similarly emphasized that familiarity with institutional resources reduced uncertainty, noting that knowing where to send students helped her respond “without feeling like I was guessing.” These accounts reflect how procedural knowledge contributed to participants’ sense of readiness.

One participant provided a detailed account of how institutional awareness shaped preparedness. Geraldine described how understanding referral processes and support structures informed her responses to student distress and reduced hesitation about intervening:

“I think a big part of feeling prepared is knowing what resources exist and how they work. When you know there’s a student wellness team, when you know who to call or how to submit a concern, it takes a lot of pressure off. You don’t feel like you’re on your

own trying to figure things out. You're part of a system that's designed to support students, and your role is to connect them to that system when needed.”

This account illustrates how preparedness was strengthened by institutional clarity, allowing faculty to act with greater confidence and consistency.

Two additional participants echoed the importance of resource awareness in shaping preparedness. Howard described feeling more confident once they understood institutional processes, explaining that preparedness came from “knowing the steps” rather than relying solely on personal judgment. Ryan similarly noted that clearer information about resources would increase confidence, emphasizing that preparedness improved when expectations and procedures were well defined. Together, these perspectives highlight how institutional knowledge functioned as a key component of faculty preparedness.

Taken together, these examples show participants' preparedness to support student well-being was frequently associated with familiarity with institutional resources and support systems. Participants described feeling more confident and less uncertain when they understood referral pathways and available services, reinforcing the role of institutional structures in shaping faculty readiness to respond to student well-being concerns.

### **Theme 9: Creating positive emotion through real-world, supportive feedback**

Participants described varying levels of confidence in their preparedness to address student well-being, with many explicitly acknowledging gaps in training and uncertainty about expectations. Although experience helped some participants feel more comfortable over time, Ryan, Howard, Cassandra, Mia, and Michael emphasized that their preparedness was limited by a lack of formal guidance related to recognizing distress, responding appropriately, and understanding institutional expectations.

Two participants described feeling uncertain about how to respond to student well-being concerns due to limited training. Ryan explained that while he wanted to support students, he often felt unsure about the appropriate course of action, noting that much of his decision-making felt improvised rather than informed by clear guidance. Howard similarly described preparedness as something developed gradually, explaining that early in their teaching experience, they “didn’t really know what to do” when students disclosed challenges, and that clearer expectations would have helped reduce uncertainty. These accounts suggest that experience alone did not fully address participants’ preparedness needs.

Ryan provided a particularly reflective account of how gaps in preparation affected his confidence. Ryan described feeling cautious when responding to student well-being concerns because of uncertainty about expectations and potential consequences, stating:

I don’t think we’re really trained for this part of the job. You want to help students, but you’re also worried about saying the wrong thing or overstepping. Sometimes it feels like you’re just hoping you handle it correctly. I think having more guidance or training around what’s expected and how to respond would make a big difference, because right now a lot of it feels like guesswork.

This reflection highlights how uncertainty and limited formal preparation contributed to discomfort and hesitation when addressing student well-being concerns.

Two other participants echoed concerns about insufficient training and unclear expectations. Cassandra noted that while she relied on experience and instinct, she would feel more confident with clearer direction, explaining that “it would be helpful to know exactly what’s expected of us in these situations.” Mia similarly emphasized that additional training would reduce anxiety about responding incorrectly, describing concern about “doing the wrong

thing” or mishandling sensitive situations. These perspectives reflect a desire for clearer institutional guidance to support consistent and confident responses.

Ryan offered a broader reflection on how limited preparation shaped faculty comfort levels. Ryan described feeling hesitant to engage deeply with student well-being concerns because of uncertainty about boundaries and responsibility, explaining:

I think part of the discomfort comes from not knowing how far we’re supposed to go.

You want to be supportive, but you’re not trained as a counselor, and no one really tells you where that line is. That uncertainty makes you second-guess yourself.

This account illustrates how ambiguity surrounding training and role expectations contributed to discomfort and caution among faculty.

Although most participants described gaps in training and uncertainty about expectations, two participants expressed greater confidence in their preparedness to address student well-being concerns despite the absence of formal training. Michael and Howard emphasized relying on professional experience and personal judgment rather than structured preparation. For example, Michael described feeling prepared through experience and role clarity, stating, “I can listen and support them, but I also know when it’s time to connect them with someone who can help more.” Similarly, Howard described preparedness as developing over time through practice, noting that confidence emerged from “being in the classroom, seeing what works, and adjusting over time.” These accounts suggest that while most participants identified gaps in preparation, a smaller number experienced their existing experience as sufficient for responding appropriately to student well-being concerns.

In summary, this theme highlights that the overall feeling of preparedness was frequently described as incomplete without clearer training, guidance, and shared expectations. A majority

of the participants expressed a desire for additional support to help them navigate student well-being concerns with greater confidence and consistency, reinforcing the perception that existing preparation was insufficient to fully support faculty in this aspect of their role.

### ***Research Question 3***

What training do full-time undergraduate educators in post-secondary online educational environments at a private university identify as critical toward their preparedness to support the overall well-being of students? Participants described their preparedness to address student well-being not only in terms of individual instructional practices, but also in relation to the availability, clarity, and consistency of institutional guidance and role-specific professional development. A majority of the participants frequently reflected on how institutional structures, training opportunities, and communicated expectations shaped their confidence and decision-making when responding to student well-being concerns, while describing varying levels of awareness of available resources and differing experiences with professional development related to student support, often noting gaps between institutional expectations and formal preparation. Analysis of interview data resulted in two themes that describe how educators experienced institutional support and training related to student well-being, including the need for clearer guidance and role-specific professional development, as well as the importance of understanding and supporting the whole adult learner through empathy, flexibility, and faculty presence.

### **Theme 10: The need for role-specific professional development and a desire for clearer institutional guidance**

Participants frequently described gaps in professional development and a lack of clear institutional guidance related to supporting student well-being in online learning environments.

Seven of the participants also emphasized that while expectations to support students were implicit, formal training and clear guidance specific to their instructional role were limited. Eight participants described limited access to professional development specifically focused on supporting student well-being in online courses. Educators reported that available training often emphasized technical skills or instructional design rather than how to respond to student well-being concerns. Michael explained, “We get a lot of training on how to use the platform, but not much on what to do when a student is struggling emotionally.” Cassandra similarly noted, “There’s an assumption that we know how to handle these situations, but no one really walks us through it.” Ryan described relying on prior experience rather than institutional training, stating, “Most of what I know comes from trial and error, not from anything formal.” Michael described the absence of clear, role-specific guidance related to student well-being, noting that expectations were often implied rather than formally articulated. Reflecting on his own experience, he stated:

I don’t think there’s ever been anything that clearly outlines what we’re supposed to do when a student is struggling beyond academics. We’re expected to care, and we want to care, but there’s no real training that says, ‘Here’s what this looks like in an online course.’ A lot of it ends up being based on your own experience, your own comfort level, and sometimes just figuring it out as you go.

These accounts illustrate how participants perceived professional development related to student well-being as limited and insufficiently tailored to their instructional responsibilities.

Seven participants expressed a desire for clearer institutional expectations and guidance related to addressing student well-being. Educators described uncertainty about what was expected of them and where their responsibilities began and ended. Geraldine explained, “I want to help students, but sometimes I’m not sure how far I’m supposed to go.” Jason echoed this

uncertainty, stating, “There’s no clear roadmap...it’s kind of left up to each instructor to figure it out.” Claudia similarly noted, “It would help to know exactly what the university expects from us in these situations.” These perspectives reflect participants’ desire for clearer guidance to support consistent and confident responses to student well-being concerns.

Taken together, participant accounts highlighted a perceived gap between institutional expectations to support student well-being and the availability of role-specific training and guidance. Educators described relying heavily on personal experience and informal learning due to limited professional development opportunities and unclear institutional expectations. These findings illustrate how the need for clearer guidance and targeted training influenced participants’ perceptions of preparedness to support student well-being in online learning environments.

### **Theme 11: Limited training for student well-being, leading to uncertainty and underutilization of university support services**

Nine participants described awareness of students’ multiple responsibilities as central to supporting well-being, frequently referencing work obligations, family responsibilities, health challenges, and financial stressors. Geraldine explained, “Our students are juggling so much...it’s never just school.” Michael similarly noted, “You can’t separate what’s happening in their lives from what’s happening in the classroom.” Mia emphasized how important it is to understand context, stating, “If you don’t take their life circumstances into account, you’re missing a big part of the picture.” These accounts reflect how participants viewed understanding students’ lived realities as foundational to supporting well-being.

Eight participants described using empathy and flexibility as key strategies for supporting adult learners, and reported adjusting deadlines, offering alternative ways to participate, and

responding with understanding when students encountered challenges. Ryan explained, “Sometimes flexibility is what keeps a student from giving up altogether.” Cassandra described flexibility as relational, stating, “It’s not about lowering standards, it’s about meeting students where they are.” Charlie similarly emphasized balance, noting, “You can be flexible and still hold expectations.” Gavin reflected at length on the importance of recognizing and responding to the broader contexts shaping adult learners’ experiences, explaining:

Our students are adults with full lives outside of school. They’re working, they have families, they have health issues, and sometimes school is the thing that gets pushed to the side when everything else piles up. I think part of my role is recognizing that and responding with some level of empathy and flexibility. If you don’t acknowledge what’s happening in their lives, you’re only seeing part of the student, and you’re going to miss what they actually need to be successful.

These examples illustrate how participants used empathy and flexibility to support persistence and engagement.

Seven participants highlighted faculty presence as essential to supporting students holistically. Educators described being visible, responsive, and relational as ways of signaling care beyond academic instruction. Jason explained, “When students know you’re there, they’re more willing to ask for help.” Geraldine similarly noted, “Presence lets students know they’re not alone.” Michael emphasized relational consistency, stating, “Showing up matters more than we sometimes realize.” These accounts highlight how faculty presence was experienced as a key component of whole-learner support.

Across participant accounts, supporting the whole adult learner emerged as a central component of perceived preparedness to address student well-being. Educators described

understanding students' complex lives, responding with empathy and flexibility, and maintaining a visible and supportive presence as essential practices. Collectively, these findings illustrate how participants framed student well-being as inseparable from the broader contexts in which adult learners engage with online education.

### **Evaluation of the Outcomes**

In this section, the findings of the study are interpreted by examining the key takeaways associated with each research question and situating them within the conceptual framework and relevant scholarly literature. Rather than restating the themes presented in Section 3, this evaluation synthesizes the findings to better understand how undergraduate educators perceive their preparedness to address students' overall well-being in postsecondary online learning environments. Participants described their preparedness in relation to instructional practices, relational approaches, and institutional support structures. For each research question, the primary themes are briefly revisited, followed by a discussion of the central insights that emerged across themes. The findings are then examined in relation to the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011), which guided the study, and considered alongside existing literature on faculty presence, online community building, student well-being, and professional development in higher education. Through this analysis, the study's contributions to theory and practice are clarified.

Research Question 1 examined how undergraduate educators perceive their preparedness to address students' overall well-being in online learning environments. The themes that emerged were participants' emphasis on building connection and community through collaboration, helping students feel seen and heard, establishing safe and supportive online classrooms, and recognizing signs of student distress followed by private outreach. From these

themes, three overarching findings emerged. The first finding indicates that educators conceptualized preparedness primarily in relational and interactional terms rather than solely in technical or content delivery competencies. Preparedness was not described as mastery of policy or protocol, but rather as the capacity to foster connection, trust, responsiveness, and psychological safety. Participants consistently framed well-being support as embedded within everyday instructional practices, including collaborative discussions, individualized communication, attentive listening, and proactive monitoring of engagement patterns. These experiences point to the overall finding that faculty perceive well-being support as building relationships through presence, empathy, and intentional interaction rather than as a discrete institutional function.

A second important finding was that educators viewed safety and trust as prerequisites for engagement. Participants described respectful classroom settings, clear expectations for respectful communication, and active facilitation as foundational conditions that enable students to participate openly. The recognition of distress signals and the use of private outreach further indicate that participants understood well-being as something reflected in engagement behaviors and relational cues. Taken together, the evidence shows that faculty perceptions of preparedness are closely tied to their ability to build and sustain supportive relationships within the online classroom.

The second finding, *establishing safety and trust as a prerequisite for engagement*, aligns strongly with the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011), particularly the domains of Relationships, Positive Emotion, and Engagement. Participants' emphasis on collaboration, community, and individualized outreach directly reflects the centrality of relationships within PERMA. Faculty described fostering connection not as an optional enhancement, but as essential

to students' sense of belonging and overall well-being, which aligns with PERMA's focus on the importance of meaningful relationships.

The third finding, *creation of safe, respectful, and supportive classroom environments*, also aligns with the domain of Positive Emotion, as participants described reducing anxiety, normalizing uncertainty, and encouraging participation in ways that promote psychological safety. Similarly, the emphasis on discussion-based learning and active interaction reflects the domain of Engagement, as educators described facilitating environments in which students were cognitively and socially immersed in learning activities. The recognition of distress signals and responsive outreach further illustrate how faculty practices intersect with multiple PERMA domains, suggesting that educators' perceptions of preparedness can be understood as operationalizing key components of well-being theory within instructional contexts. The third finding also aligns with existing literature on faculty presence and community building in online education. Research on the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) emphasizes the importance of teaching presence and social presence in fostering meaningful learning experiences. Participants' descriptions of visibility, responsiveness, and active facilitation closely mirror these constructs, reinforcing the role of instructor presence in supporting both academic engagement and emotional well-being. Additionally, previous research on belonging and online learning environments has demonstrated that students' sense of connection to instructors and peers contributes significantly to persistence and academic success (Tinto, 2012). Participants' emphasis on reducing isolation through collaborative practices and individualized outreach supports these findings, suggesting that faculty perceptions of preparedness are closely tied to relational strategies that enhance student belonging. The

recognition of behavioral indicators of distress and the use of private outreach are also consistent with literature on early alert practices and faculty engagement in student support systems.

While all three findings align with existing literature, they extend prior research by prioritizing faculty perceptions of preparedness as relationally constructed rather than policy-driven. Rather than emphasizing formal training or institutional mandates, participants described preparedness as emerging from their ability to build and sustain meaningful connections within the online classroom. This distinction contributes to the literature by highlighting how faculty conceptualize well-being support as embedded within instructional relationships.

Whereas Research Question 1 focused on how faculty conceptualize supporting student well-being, Research Question 2 examined how undergraduate educators perceive their level of confidence and preparedness in addressing students' overall well-being in online learning environments. As presented in Section 3, Themes 5 through 9 reflected participants' descriptions of varied levels of confidence, limited formal training, uncertainty regarding institutional expectations, and reliance on personal experience when responding to student well-being concerns. Together, these themes suggest that while faculty frequently engaged in supportive practices, their sense of preparedness was often shaped by experience rather than structured guidance from their institution.

Across Themes 5–9, a central finding was that participants' confidence in supporting student well-being was largely experienced-based rather than training-driven. Many educators described learning how to respond to student concerns through trial and error, informal conversations with colleagues, or prior professional experience rather than through formal professional development. Although participants demonstrated a strong commitment to

supporting students, several expressed uncertainties about whether they were responding appropriately or within the boundaries of their role.

A second finding was that participants experienced ambiguity regarding institutional expectations. Although educators consistently acknowledged the importance of supporting student well-being, eight of the twelve participants described uncertainty about the boundaries of their role, particularly when concerns extended beyond academic performance and into social or emotional domains. Several participants indicated they were unsure whether they were expected to provide direct emotional support, refer students immediately, or limit their involvement to academic accommodations. This role ambiguity aligns with prior research indicating that faculty often experience tension between instructional responsibilities and expanding expectations related to student mental health and well-being (Constantinou et al., 2022; Gulliver et al., 2018). Porter et al. (2025) similarly found that faculty frequently report feeling overwhelmed by institutional expectations without corresponding clarity or training. In this study, participants described cautious decision making when confronted with complex student disclosures, suggesting that unclear institutional guidance may contribute to hesitation and stress. Consistent with literature on role expansion in higher education, these findings suggest that ambiguity surrounding expectations can undermine faculty confidence and complicate efforts to provide timely support (Ray et al., 2024).

A third finding emerged as participants described limited awareness and inconsistent use of university support services. Five participants reported confidence in referring students to appropriate resources, while seven acknowledged gaps in their knowledge of available services or uncertainty regarding referral processes. Several participants indicated they relied on informal networks or personal judgment rather than structured institutional guidance. These findings

reflect patterns identified in national surveys indicating that faculty often lack familiarity with campus mental health resources and referral protocols (Gulliver et al., 2018; Gay & Barth, 2024). Research further suggests that when institutional communication regarding support services is fragmented or unclear, faculty engagement with those services becomes inconsistent (Travia et al., 2022). Taken together, these findings suggest that preparedness was shaped not only by individual relational dispositions and interpersonal skills, but also by the presence or absence of institutional clarity, accessible training, and structured support systems. In the absence of coordinated institutional messaging, faculty preparedness appeared to develop unevenly, reinforcing the need for clearer guidance and systematic professional development aligned with student well-being initiatives.

The three findings related to Research Question 2 align most clearly with the domains of Meaning and Accomplishment within the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011). Participants frequently described a strong sense of purpose in supporting students, indicating that helping students navigate challenges was viewed as part of their professional role. This reflects the domain of Meaning, as faculty connected their work to broader contributions to student growth and persistence. At the same time, uncertainty regarding training and expectations sometimes limited educators' confidence in their effectiveness. This dynamic connects to the domain of Accomplishment, which emphasizes feelings of competence and mastery. When participants described relying on experience rather than structured guidance, their sense of preparedness appeared tied to personal confidence rather than institutional reinforcement. The absence of formalized training may therefore influence not only faculty practice but also their perceived sense of professional competence in supporting student well-being. These findings suggest that while faculty often embody relational elements of PERMA in their interactions with students,

institutional structures may not consistently support educators' own sense of accomplishment or clarity in fulfilling this aspect of their role.

The findings associated with Research Question 2 are consistent with existing literature on faculty preparedness and the emotional demands associated with online teaching in higher education. Research has shown that faculty are increasingly expected to respond to student well-being concerns despite limited formal training in mental health or student support practices (Riba, 2025). Participants' descriptions of learning through experience and informal networks reflect patterns identified in prior studies examining faculty role expansion in online and traditional learning environments. Additionally, Gulliver et al. (2018) found that although many faculty members felt moderately confident offering emotional support, 60 percent reported feeling under equipped to manage student mental health concerns, and fewer than 12 percent had received formal training. Participants in this study similarly described learning how to respond to student well-being concerns primarily through experience and informal networks rather than structured preparation. Reports of role ambiguity and uncertainty also reflect findings by Garcia Chitiva and Correa (2024), who emphasized the need for clear institutional policies and structured guidance to support faculty in integrating well-being practices into their teaching. Additionally, Constantinou et al. (2022) and Ray et al. (2024) found that institutions implementing structured faculty development programs observed increased confidence among faculty in supporting student well-being, further highlighting the importance of formalized preparation.

While the three findings associated with Research Question 2 confirm much of the existing literature, it also extends it by illustrating how confidence develops relationally and experientially in online settings. Rather than describing preparedness as emerging primarily from

institutional policy or formal credentialing, participants framed it as developing through practice, reflection, and accumulated experience. Although prior research emphasizes the importance of structured training and institutional leadership in strengthening faculty confidence (Constantinou et al., 2022; Garcia Chitiva & Correa, 2024), the present findings suggest that experiential learning plays a central role in how faculty come to perceive themselves as prepared. This extension highlights the need not only for clearer institutional guidance and professional development, but also for intentional opportunities for reflection and applied practice within online teaching contexts.

Building on perceptions of preparedness, Research Question 3 examined how undergraduate educators perceive institutional guidance and professional development related to supporting students' overall well-being in online learning environments. As presented in Section 3, Themes 10 and 11 reflected participants' descriptions of limited role-specific professional development, unclear institutional expectations, uneven awareness of support services, and the importance of understanding and responding to the complex realities of adult learners' lives. Together, these themes, which helped to establish three findings for RQ3, suggest that faculty preparedness is shaped not only by individual relational practices, but also by institutional structures that either clarify or complicate their role in supporting student well-being.

Across Themes 10 and 11, the first key finding was that participants perceived a gap between institutional expectations and institutional preparation. While educators understood that supporting student well-being was valued, many described a lack of clear guidance outlining how this responsibility should be enacted within their instructional role. Participants frequently reported that professional development focused more on technology or course design than on responding to student distress or navigating well-being concerns in online environments.

A second finding was that participants framed their preparedness through their understanding of the whole adult learner. Nine of the twelve participants explicitly referenced students' work responsibilities, caregiving roles, financial pressures, and health challenges as central considerations in their approach to supporting well-being. Faculty described adjusting communication timelines, offering flexibility with deadlines, and initiating relational check ins when students disclosed competing life demands. Rather than viewing well-being as separate from academic engagement, participants consistently described it as embedded within students' broader life contexts. This framing aligns with research on adult learners, which emphasizes the importance of flexibility, empathy, and contextual awareness in promoting persistence and engagement, particularly in online environments (Bailey et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2024). Scholarship on adult student success further indicates that learners balancing multiple roles are more likely to persist when faculty demonstrate relational understanding and adaptive instructional practices (Gay & Barth, 2024). In this study, preparedness was therefore conceptualized not solely as knowledge of referral processes or institutional policy, but as the capacity to interpret academic challenges through a holistic lens that acknowledged students' lived realities.

A third finding emerged as participants' descriptions suggested that institutional support structures influenced faculty confidence and consistency in responding to well-being concerns. Seven participants indicated that when guidance was perceived as informal, decentralized, or unclear, their responses relied heavily on personal judgment and prior experience. In contrast, those who reported clearer awareness of institutional messaging or available resources expressed greater confidence and consistency in their decision making. This pattern reflects prior research demonstrating that institutional clarity and structured professional development significantly

shape faculty preparedness and response behaviors (Constantinou et al., 2022; Ray et al., 2024). Porter et al. (2025) similarly found that faculty confidence in addressing student mental health concerns increases when institutions provide explicit expectations and accessible support pathways. The variation observed in this study suggests that institutional clarity functions not only as procedural guidance, but also as a stabilizing factor in shaping faculty perceptions of competence. Without coordinated institutional structures, preparedness appeared uneven and individualized, reinforcing the importance of alignment between institutional messaging, training, and faculty practice.

The three findings related to Research Question 3 connect most strongly with the domains of Meaning, Relationships, and Accomplishment within the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011). Participants' emphasis on understanding the whole adult learner and responding with empathy reflects the relational foundation of well-being, aligning with the Relationships domain. Faculty described their role as extending beyond content delivery to include recognition of students' lived experiences, which supports relational trust and belonging. The strong sense of professional purpose described by many participants aligns with the Meaning domain. Educators frequently articulated a commitment to supporting students as part of their broader mission in higher education. However, uncertainty about institutional expectations and limited professional development may influence the Accomplishment domain, as clarity and structured preparation contribute to feelings of competence and mastery. When institutional guidance is inconsistent, faculty preparedness may rely heavily on personal judgment rather than supported professional growth. These findings suggest that while faculty relational practices reflect core elements of PERMA, institutional systems play a significant role

in reinforcing, or limiting, educators' confidence and consistency in supporting student well-being.

The three findings for Research Question 3 collectively align with existing literature on faculty development and institutional responsibility in supporting student well-being. The first finding, that faculty rely heavily on informal learning and peer networks to navigate student well-being concerns, reflects patterns identified in scholarship on faculty preparedness and role expansion (Garcia-Chitiva & Correa, 2024; Gulliver et al., 2018). The second finding, that unclear institutional expectations contribute to uncertainty in how faculty define their responsibilities, corresponds with research emphasizing the importance of structured guidance and clear policy frameworks to support well-being initiatives (Constantinou et al., 2022; Ray et al., 2024). Together, these findings reinforce prior evidence that institutions increasingly promote student success and well-being initiatives while often providing limited formal preparation for addressing nonacademic concerns (Gulliver et al., 2018).

The third finding, that faculty perceptions of preparedness are shaped by institutional clarity and consistency, extends the literature by illustrating how messaging, training, and expectations influence confidence in practice. Consistent with research on online learner engagement, which underscores the importance of social presence and responsiveness to learners' contexts (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), participants emphasized understanding students' broader life responsibilities as central to their role. However, rather than viewing professional development solely as skill acquisition, participants described it as essential for reducing uncertainty and promoting consistency across instructors. This emphasis suggests that aligning institutional messaging, training, and expectations with the relational practices faculty

already utilize in online learning environments may strengthen both faculty confidence and student well-being outcomes.

Taken together, the nine findings across Research Questions 1 through 3 suggest that undergraduate educators perceive preparedness to support student well-being as fundamentally relational, experientially developed, and shaped by institutional context. Participants consistently emphasized connection, trust, responsiveness, and psychological safety as central to their ability to support students in online learning environments. At the same time, confidence in enacting these practices was often influenced by prior experience rather than formal training, and perceptions of preparedness were shaped by the clarity, or lack thereof, of institutional guidance. When examined through the PERMA framework (Seligman, 2011), the findings illustrate how faculty practices reflect key dimensions of well-being, particularly relationships, engagement, meaning, and accomplishment. Collectively, the study highlights the interplay between individual instructional practice and institutional support structures in shaping how educators understand and enact their role in supporting students' overall well-being in online higher education.

### **Implications and Recommendations for Practice**

The findings of this study have direct implications for institutional practice in online higher education. As discussed in the evaluation of outcomes, faculty preparedness to support student well-being was shaped by relational instructional practices, experiential learning, institutional clarity, and an understanding of the whole adult learner. Building on these findings, this section presents five implications for practice: 1) Faculty Preparedness Is Relationally Enacted; 2) Faculty Confidence Develops Experientially, Rather Than Structurally; 3) Institutional Clarity Influences Faculty Perceptions of Preparedness; 4) Supporting the Whole

Adult Learner Requires Structural Flexibility; and 5) Faculty Presence Serves as a Protective Factor in Online Learning.

Each implication is directly grounded in a key finding from the study and is followed by a corresponding recommendation designed to strengthen faculty preparedness and institutional alignment. The discussion is organized using a structured progression of Finding → Implication → Recommendation, ensuring that each recommendation is explicitly connected to the evidence generated through the study. Together, these implications and recommendations provide actionable guidance for institutions seeking to better support faculty in addressing students' overall well-being in online learning environments.

***Implication 1: Faculty Preparedness Is Relationally Enacted***

Faculty perceived preparedness to support student well-being as grounded primarily in relational practices, including building connection, fostering trust, maintaining instructional presence, creating psychological safety, and engaging in individualized outreach. This emphasis on relational engagement aligns with scholarship suggesting that faculty–student relationships are central to student belonging, engagement, and persistence, particularly in online environments where social presence must be intentionally cultivated (Allen et al., 2020; Lan & Saad, 2024). Participants' descriptions also reflect research indicating that teaching presence and relational trust significantly influence students' emotional well-being and academic motivation (Garrison et al., 2000; Trask-Kerr et al., 2019). If preparedness is relationally enacted rather than policy driven, then institutions must recognize that student well-being support is embedded within everyday instructional practices rather than confined to formal referral systems or compliance-based training.

Faculty development models that focus exclusively on technical training, course design mechanics, or content delivery may therefore overlook the relational competencies faculty identify as central to supporting student well-being. Prior research has similarly noted that institutions often emphasize procedural knowledge while underemphasizing relational and affective dimensions of teaching that influence student resilience and engagement (Constantinou et al., 2022; Porter et al., 2025). Without intentional reinforcement of relational practices, institutions risk undervaluing what faculty perceive as the primary mechanism through which they support student well-being. Institutions should design professional development initiatives that explicitly reinforce relational teaching practices in online environments, consistent with research advocating for trauma-informed and relationship centered approaches to higher education (Ray et al., 2024). Training should include strategies for building community, fostering respectful communication, promoting psychological safety, and engaging in proactive outreach. Embedding these relational competencies into faculty onboarding, ongoing development cycles, and evaluation frameworks would promote alignment between institutional expectations and instructional practice while strengthening the relational infrastructure that undergirds student well-being in online learning environments (Gay & Barth, 2024; Travia et al., 2022). Embedding these relational competencies into faculty onboarding, ongoing development cycles, and evaluation frameworks would promote alignment between institutional expectations and instructional practice while strengthening the relational infrastructure that undergirds student well-being in online learning environments. By formalizing and reinforcing these practices, institutions signal that relational engagement is not peripheral to academic instruction, but foundational to fostering student well-being and sustained engagement in virtual settings.

***Implication 2: Faculty Confidence Develops Experientially, Rather Than Structurally***

Participants described confidence in supporting student well-being as emerging largely through experience, reflection, and informal learning rather than through structured professional development. This pattern aligns with research indicating that faculty often develop competence in addressing student well-being through trial and error or peer consultation rather than formalized training (Gulliver et al., 2018; Constantinou et al., 2022). When preparedness is developed informally, variability in faculty confidence and response approaches is likely, a concern echoed in studies highlighting inconsistencies in faculty engagement with student mental health support across institutions (Porter et al., 2025; Gay & Barth, 2024). This implication may result in inconsistent student experiences across courses and programs, particularly in online environments where instructional presence varies (Lan & Saad, 2024). Faculty who lack prior experience or personal confidence may feel uncertain when addressing student distress, potentially leading to hesitation or underutilization of support resources, a dynamic also observed in trauma informed training research (Ray et al., 2024). Institutions should therefore provide role specific professional development focused on recognizing distress indicators, responding appropriately within instructional boundaries, and making effective referrals to student support services, consistent with calls for structured faculty preparation in student well-being initiatives (Garcia-Chitiva & Correa, 2024; Suwanwong et al., 2024). Scenario-based training and case simulations may help faculty build confidence while clarifying role expectations, particularly when aligned with clearly articulated institutional guidance. Clear documentation outlining faculty responsibilities and referral pathways should be readily accessible to reduce ambiguity and promote consistency in practice.

### ***Implication 3: Institutional Clarity Influences Faculty Perceptions of Preparedness***

Participants frequently reported ambiguity regarding institutional expectations and limited clarity about the extent of their role in supporting student well-being. Eight participants described uncertainty about when to intervene, how extensively to engage in non-academic concerns, and when referral to student services was appropriate. Unclear expectations may contribute to role ambiguity, cautious decision making, and inconsistent implementation of well-being support practices, patterns that have been documented in prior research examining faculty engagement in student mental health initiatives (Gulliver et al., 2018; Constantinou et al., 2022). Studies have shown that when faculty perceive institutional messaging as fragmented or informal, responses to student distress vary widely based on personal comfort level, prior experience, or informal peer consultation (Porter et al., 2025; Ray et al., 2024).

When institutional messaging does not clearly articulate faculty responsibilities or provide structured guidance, preparedness becomes individualized rather than systemic. Travia et al. (2022) noted that many institutions lack a unified or clearly operationalized definition of well-being, resulting in inconsistent implementation across departments and programs. Similarly, Gay and Barth (2024) found variability in faculty awareness of available mental health resources, reinforcing how unclear communication can undermine coordinated response efforts. Without clear expectations, faculty may hesitate out of concern for overstepping professional boundaries or inadvertently assuming responsibilities beyond their instructional role.

Institutions should articulate clear, consistent guidance regarding faculty roles in supporting student well-being in online environments. This may include written protocols, referral guides, communication templates, and alignment between academic leadership and student support services. Transparent communication can reduce uncertainty and promote greater

consistency across instructional contexts. By shifting from informal expectation to explicit institutional commitment, universities can move well-being support from an individualized practice to a coordinated, systemic strategy embedded within the online learning environment.

***Implication 4: Supporting the Whole Adult Learner Requires Structural Flexibility***

Participants emphasized understanding students as whole adult learners whose academic engagement is influenced by work responsibilities, caregiving roles, health challenges, and financial pressures. Nine participants explicitly referenced these competing life demands as central to how they interpreted missed assignments, disengagement, or requests for extensions. This framing aligns with scholarship on adult learners, which emphasizes that persistence in higher education is strongly influenced by external role demands and life responsibilities (Bailey et al., 2019; Wagner et al., 2024). Research further suggests that adult learners in online environments are more likely to persist when instructional practices acknowledge contextual realities rather than assume traditional student availability patterns (Gay & Barth, 2024).

If student well-being is intertwined with broader life contexts, then rigid instructional policies may unintentionally undermine student persistence and engagement. Studies examining online learner attrition have shown that inflexible deadlines and limited accommodation practices can contribute to withdrawal, particularly among students balancing employment and caregiving obligations (Wagner et al., 2024). At the same time, literature cautions that flexibility without structure can create inconsistency and perceived inequity across courses (Travia et al., 2022). Faculty in this study described flexibility as essential to supporting adult learners; however, without institutional alignment or clear parameters, flexibility was applied unevenly based on individual discretion and comfort level.

Institutions should therefore consider policies that support reasonable instructional flexibility while maintaining academic standards. Clear guidance on flexible deadline practices, alternative participation options, and communication strategies can support faculty in balancing rigor with responsiveness. Additionally, professional development should include strategies for applying flexibility equitably and transparently, ensuring that responsiveness does not depend solely on individual faculty interpretation. By articulating structured flexibility rather than informal accommodation, institutions can promote both academic integrity and sustained student engagement in online environments.

***Implication 5: Faculty Presence Serves as a Protective Factor in Online Learning***

Participants consistently described faculty visibility, responsiveness, and active engagement as central to fostering trust, psychological safety, and belonging in online classrooms. Ten participants emphasized that timely feedback, proactive outreach, and consistent communication helped students feel seen and supported, particularly in moments of academic or personal difficulty. These findings align with research on teaching presence within the Community of Inquiry framework, which identifies instructional visibility and facilitation as critical to student engagement and satisfaction in online environments (Garrison et al., 2000). Studies have also shown that perceived instructor presence is positively associated with students' emotional engagement and sense of belonging, both of which function as protective factors against isolation in virtual learning contexts (Allen et al., 2020; Lan & Saad, 2024).

Faculty presence may therefore function as a protective factor in mitigating student isolation and disengagement in online learning environments. Research suggests that students who perceive strong instructor presence report higher levels of motivation, trust, and persistence (Trask-Kerr et al., 2019). Conversely, diminished instructional presence has been associated with

lower participation, increased feelings of disconnection, and elevated stress (Petillion & McNeil, 2020). If presence is central to perceived preparedness, then its absence may negatively impact student well-being and engagement, particularly in fully online courses where relational cues must be intentionally enacted rather than assumed.

Institutions should therefore emphasize teaching presence as a core component of online instructional quality standards. Faculty evaluation rubrics and course review processes should include criteria related to responsiveness, interaction frequency, facilitation of dialogue, and intentional community building. Professional development initiatives should reinforce strategies for maintaining visible and engaged instructional presence, including structured communication plans, personalized feedback approaches, and techniques for fostering peer interaction. By formalizing teaching presence as an indicator of instructional quality, institutions can strengthen both faculty preparedness and student well-being in virtual learning environments.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study contribute to understanding how undergraduate educators perceive their preparedness to support student well-being in online learning environments. However, additional research is needed to expand, refine, and deepen this line of inquiry. Based on the results of this study, two potential future research directions are proposed.

One area for future research involves examining the impact of structured professional development on faculty preparedness to support student well-being in online learning environments. The purpose of this proposed study would be to examine the impact of structured, role-specific professional development on faculty confidence, clarity, and consistency in addressing student well-being concerns in online higher education environments. Potential research question could be as follows: 1) How does participation in structured professional

development influence faculty perceptions of preparedness to support student well-being in online courses?; 2) Does targeted training improve faculty clarity regarding institutional expectations and referral processes?; and 3) How do faculty describe changes in their confidence and instructional practices following participation in well-being-focused professional development? The target population would include full-time and adjunct undergraduate faculty teaching in online programs across multiple institutions of higher education. Expanding beyond a single institutional context would allow for comparison across institutional types and structures.

A quantitative quasi-experimental design could be employed. Faculty participants would complete a pre-training survey assessing perceptions of preparedness, clarity of role expectations, and familiarity with student support services. After participating in a structured professional development program focused on student well-being, participants would complete a post-training survey. Follow-up semi-structured interviews could be conducted to gather qualitative data on changes in confidence, practice, and perceived institutional alignment. Quantitative data would allow for measurement of shifts in perceived preparedness, while qualitative data would provide insight into how faculty integrate training into relational instructional practices. This study would provide evidence regarding whether structured professional development meaningfully enhances faculty preparedness and confidence. Findings could inform institutional investment in targeted training and contribute to literature on faculty development, well-being initiatives, and online teaching effectiveness. Additionally, such research could clarify whether experiential learning alone is sufficient, or whether formalized training produces measurable improvements in faculty practice.

Another recommended study could explore undergraduate students' lived experiences of working with faculty in online course environments. The purpose of this proposed study would

be to understand how students experience and interpret faculty support in relation to their overall well-being, engagement, and persistence in online learning contexts. Rather than examining discrete faculty behaviors in isolation, this study would seek to uncover the essence of how faculty interactions shape students' sense of connection, safety, and belonging.

The overarching research question guiding this phenomenological study could be: What are undergraduate students' lived experiences of working with faculty in online course environments? Two sub questions might include: 1) How do undergraduate students describe specific interactions with faculty that influenced their sense of well-being, connection, or psychological safety in online courses?; and 2) How do students interpret the meaning of faculty presence, responsiveness, and flexibility in shaping their engagement and persistence?

The target population would include undergraduate students enrolled in fully online programs at accredited institutions of higher education. A diverse sample representing various disciplines, life circumstances, and demographic backgrounds would strengthen the study's transferability and deepen understanding of how faculty support is experienced across contexts.

A qualitative phenomenological design could be used to explore students' lived experiences of faculty support in online courses. Data collection would involve a three-interview series with each participant conducted over a defined period of time. The first interview would focus on eliciting broad descriptions of participants' experiences working with faculty in online environments. The second interview would probe more deeply into specific encounters and the meanings participants attribute to those experiences. The third interview would provide an opportunity for reflection, clarification, and synthesis, allowing participants to further articulate the essence of their lived experiences. Data analysis would involve identifying significant

statements, clustering meaning units, and developing a composite description that captures the shared essence of students' experiences with faculty support in online learning contexts.

This proposed study would extend current research by illuminating the essence of how students experience faculty support in online learning environments and what those experiences mean in relation to their well-being, engagement, and persistence. Rather than measuring discrete behaviors or satisfaction indicators, this inquiry would seek to understand how students interpret faculty presence, responsiveness, and flexibility within the context of their broader academic and personal lives. By capturing the shared structures of these lived experiences, the findings could reveal how relational encounters with faculty shape students' sense of belonging, psychological safety, and motivation to persist. Such insights would offer institutions a deeper understanding of how faculty preparedness is experienced at the student level and why certain relational practices matter. Ultimately, this work could inform faculty development and institutional policy in ways that are grounded not only in instructional intention but in the lived meaning students ascribe to faculty engagement in online higher education.

Together, these proposed studies would expand understanding of faculty preparedness and student well-being in online learning environments by examining both the impact of institutional interventions and the student experience of faculty support. Continued research in this area is essential to developing evidence-based strategies that strengthen relational teaching practices, clarify institutional expectations, and promote student flourishing in postsecondary online education.

## **Conclusions**

This dissertation in practice examined a persistent gap in online higher education; although faculty recognize the importance of student well-being, many reported feeling

underprepared to identify concerns, respond appropriately, and navigate institutional expectations in online settings. The purpose of this qualitative exploratory single case study was to explore the preparedness and experiences of full-time undergraduate educators in addressing students' overall well-being in online learning environments, using the PERMA model (Seligman, 2011) as the guiding conceptual framework.

The target population included full-time undergraduate educators teaching in fully online or hybrid formats at a private institution of higher education in the western United States. Eligibility criteria required: 1) participants to be employed full time at the study site; 2) participants to have held full-time employment at the study site for at least two years; and 3) participants teach undergraduate courses in an online or hybrid modality at the study site. Recruitment and participation procedures were conducted in alignment with institutional review board approval, and interested participants reviewed informed consent materials prior to participating. Demographic variables were collected via the questionnaire to describe the sample and contextualize findings, without linking characteristics to individual participant codes.

Data collection occurred in two phases. First, 17 participants completed a 10-question open-ended questionnaire. Second, 11 of those participants elected to complete a follow-up semi-structured interview conducted virtually using a consistent interview protocol. The final interview sample represented multiple disciplines and experience levels, with years teaching online ranging from 5 to 25 years. These combined data sources supported triangulation, as well as strengthened the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings.

Data analysis followed a thematic approach. Questionnaire data were open-coded, then consolidated from 66 initial codes into 36 secondary codes across eight categories to establish eight preliminary themes. Interview data were coded using the same process, resulting in 58

initial codes that were collapsed into 32 secondary codes across five categories and 11 preliminary themes. Themes from both sources were analyzed independently and then compared to identify convergence and divergence across methods, supporting rigor in how themes and findings were established. Trustworthiness was strengthened through triangulation, transcript accuracy verification through participant review, consistent procedures, transparent documentation, reflexive journaling, analytic memoing, and maintenance of an audit trail to mitigate bias and ensure findings were grounded in participant data.

Across the three research questions, participants described preparedness as more than technical competence. For Research Question 1, participants described supporting student well-being through relational and interactional practices, including building connection, fostering trust, maintaining presence, and creating psychologically safe learning environments, with emphasis on supporting students without judgment and encouraging engagement. For Research Question 2, participants consistently described preparedness as developing through experience, reflection, and informal learning, while also noting uncertainty tied to limited formal training and unclear expectations for responding to student well-being concerns. For Research Question 3, participants described three central influences on preparedness: a perceived gap between institutional expectations and institutional preparation, the importance of understanding students as whole adult learners, and the role of institutional support structures in shaping confidence and consistency in responses. Notably, nine of the twelve participants explicitly referenced adult learners' competing responsibilities, describing flexibility and relational check-ins as necessary to support persistence and engagement.

Taken together, these findings informed five practice focused implications addressed in Section 3. The implications emphasize that faculty preparedness is often relationally enacted in

everyday instruction, and therefore professional development should intentionally reinforce relational teaching practices in online environments. They also indicate that when preparedness develops informally, variability in confidence and response approaches is likely, increasing the need for role specific training that clarifies boundaries, recognizes distress indicators, and strengthens referral practice. The findings further suggest that institutional ambiguity can produce cautious decision making and uneven practice, underscoring the importance of consistent institutional messaging, accessible protocols, and alignment between academic leadership and student support services. In addition, participants' emphasis on adult learner context highlights the value of policies and professional learning that support equitable instructional flexibility while maintaining academic standards. Finally, participants' repeated focus on visibility, responsiveness, and active engagement underscores the continued importance of teaching presence as a condition that supports belonging and mitigates isolation in online learning environments.

This study also offered recommendations for future research to deepen understanding of how faculty development, institutional clarity, and student experience intersect. The proposed directions prioritize research that tests structured professional development approaches and research that centers student-lived experience of faculty support in online courses. This is important because improving alignment between institutional expectations, faculty preparation, and student well-being outcomes requires evidence that is both practice grounded and stakeholder informed.

In closing, this dissertation contributes a clear message for institutions serving online undergraduate learners: supporting student well-being is not an add-on that occurs outside instruction, rather it is enacted through everyday relational practice, shaped by institutional

clarity, and strengthened through intentional preparation and aligned support structures. Faculty do not need to become counselors to support well-being, but they do need clear expectations, practical preparation, and institutional alignment that honors the relational work they already do.

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## Appendix A

## Questionnaire Questions Alignment Matrix

Open-Ended Questionnaire Questions	PERMA Tenants	Research Questions		
		RQ 1	RQ2	RQ 3
Are you currently employed as a full-time undergraduate educator (i.e., 40+ hours per week) at the study site?				
Have you held full-time employment at the study site for a minimum of two years?				
Do you teach in a fully online or hybrid format at the undergraduate level?				
Social, emotional, and mental well-being are interconnected facets of overall health, which highlight the importance of positive emotions, resilience, purpose, and supportive relationships in enabling individuals to cope with life's challenges and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Based on that description, do you feel prepared to support students in these areas? Follow Up: How would you describe your overall preparedness to support the social, emotional, and mental well-being of undergraduate students in your online courses?	P	X		
What indicators or signs do you look for when trying to identify student well-being concerns in an online setting?		X		
During your time at this university, what types of training or professional development have you received related to supporting student well-being?			X	
In what ways do you feel your training has (or has not) prepared you to support or enhance your ability to address student well-being?			X	
What specific strategies do you use to foster a sense of connection and belonging for students in your online courses?				X
In what ways do you see students feeling accomplished or recognized in your online courses?	A			X
In what ways do you support students in finding meaning or purpose in their academic work?	M			X
How do you see the role of positive relationships (e.g., encouragement, motivation) in supporting your students' success online?	R	X	X	X

How do you promote student engagement during online learning experiences?	E	X	X	X
Whole Human Education™ at National University is a 360-degree holistic approach that provides academic, emotional, career, financial, and family support to ensure students thrive both in and beyond the classroom. Based on that description, how do your efforts to support students align with the principles of whole human education? Follow Up: In what ways do your efforts reflect this approach, and where might they differ?		X	X	X

*Note.* This table demonstrates the alignment between data collection methods, PERMA theory elements (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment), and the study's three research questions. An "X" indicates where a specific question or prompt directly supports the corresponding research question. The PERMA component(s) most relevant to each question are identified in the left margin where applicable. Questions were designed to ensure overlap and triangulation between methods while preserving the integrity of each construct.

## Appendix B

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions Alignment Matrix

<b>Semi-Structured Interview</b>	PERMA Tenants	<b>Research Questions</b>		
		RQ 1	RQ 2	RQ 3
Can you describe your role as an undergraduate educator, including your area of instruction and how you define your responsibilities in the online learning environment? Follow Up: How has your experience in this role shaped your approach to teaching and interacting with students online?			X	
What does “student well-being” mean to you in the context of online higher education? Follow Up: How does your understanding of student well-being influence the way you support your students?		X		
What role do you believe faculty should play in supporting student well-being in an online learning environment? Follow Up: Please share an example from your experience that illustrates your perspective on this role?		X		
How prepared do you feel to support students’ social, emotional, and mental well-being in your online courses? Follow Up: How has that training (or lack thereof) influenced the way you support student well-being in your courses?		X	X	
If you are willing, can you please share an experience in which you recognized a student struggling with well-being in your online course? Follow Up: How did you respond?		X		
What other experiences have shaped your ability to recognize when a student may be struggling with their well-being? Follow Up: How do you typically respond when you notice signs that a student might be struggling?		X	X	
Please describe how you typically respond when a student brings up a well-being concern in an online course? Follow Up: Walk me through a recent or typical situation like that?		X	X	

<p>What types of professional development or training have you received that focused on student well-being?  Follow Up: Do you feel this training was adequate? If so, what specifically led you to feel that way? If not, what additional training would help you feel better prepared?</p>			X	X
<p>How has that training (or lack thereof) influenced the way you support student well-being in your courses?</p>			X	X
<p>Which aspects of your training did you find most helpful, and which areas felt insufficient or lacking?</p>			X	X
<p>Have you received any training outside of this university that informed your approach?  Follow Up (if yes): What did that training look like?</p>			X	X
<p>Please describe a specific instance where training or institutional support helped you address a student's well-being need?  Follow Up: Based on that experience, what additional support or training do you think would better equip you to respond to student well-being concerns?</p>			X	X
<p>What kinds of institutional support do you believe would better equip you to help students manage stress, isolation, or emotional struggles?  Follow Up: How do you see your role, if at all, in connecting students with those kinds of supports?</p>				X
<p>What specific strategies do you use to promote student engagement and positive emotion in your online courses?  Follow Up: How have students responded to these strategies, and what impact have you noticed, if any?</p>	P, E	X		
<p>How do you help students develop relationships or a sense of community in your online classes?  Follow Up 1: What challenges, if any, have you faced in trying to foster community online?  Follow Up 2: How have you addressed those challenges specifically?</p>	R	X		
<p>In what ways do you encourage students to find meaning in their coursework or academic goals?  Follow Up: How do you know when your efforts to support students in finding meaning are effective or when they may need adjustment?</p>	M	X		
<p>How do you provide opportunities for students to feel accomplished or recognized in your class?  Follow Up 1: How do students typically respond to those opportunities?  Follow Up 2: What impact have you noticed on their engagement or confidence?</p>	A	X		

*Note.* This table demonstrates the alignment between data collection methods, PERMA theory elements (Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning, and Accomplishment), and the study's three research questions. An "X" indicates where a specific question or prompt directly supports the corresponding research question. The PERMA component(s) most relevant to each question are identified in the left margin where applicable. Questions were designed to ensure overlap and triangulation between methods while preserving the integrity of each construct.

## Appendix C

### Field Testing Invitation Script

**Subject Line:** Request for Expert Feedback on Qualitative Research Instruments

**Email/Message Body:**

Dear [Dr./Professor/Name],

I hope this message finds you well. I am currently preparing to conduct my dissertation research for the Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership program at National University. My qualitative single case study explores undergraduate educators' preparedness in addressing students' well-being in a post-secondary online environment.


As part of the preparation phase, I am seeking expert feedback on the data collection instruments I have developed — specifically, an open-ended questionnaire and a semi-structured interview guide to be used during my research. Your expertise in [insert field, e.g., qualitative methods, online learning, student engagement, higher education] would be invaluable in ensuring the clarity, relevance, and rigor of these tools.

Attached you will find:

- A brief description of the study purpose and research questions
- Draft versions of the questionnaire and interview guide
- An evaluation rubric with key areas for feedback

I would be incredibly grateful if you could review the instruments and complete the rubric by [insert date]. Your insights will directly inform necessary refinements and contribute to the trustworthiness of my research design.

Please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions. Thank you for considering this request, and I truly appreciate your time and support.

Warm regards,  
Shane M. Strup  
Doctoral Student, Ed.D. in Organizational Leadership  
National University  


## **Appendix D**

### **Field Testing Background Information**

#### **Study Purpose**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study is to explore how full-time undergraduate educators at a private, nonprofit university perceive their preparedness to address the overall well-being of students in a post-secondary online learning environment. Guided by Seligman's (2011) PERMA model of well-being, the study seeks to understand the strategies faculty employ, the challenges they face, and the institutional supports available to foster student well-being in virtual classrooms.

#### **Research Questions**

1. How do full-time undergraduate faculty in post-secondary online educational environments at a private university describe supporting student overall well-being?
2. How do full-time undergraduate educators in post-secondary online educational environments at a private university describe their preparedness to support students' overall well-being?
3. What training do full-time undergraduate educators in post-secondary online educational environments at a private university identify as critical toward their preparedness to support the overall well-being of students?

## Appendix E

### Draft Instrumentation for Field Testing

#### Open-Ended Questionnaire

Target Audience: Full-time educators, specializing in teaching at the undergraduate level, across a variety of disciplines, at a private institution of higher education in the western United States.

Please answer the following questions in as much detail as you are comfortable providing. Your insights will help me better understand how educators support student well-being in online learning environments.

1. Social, emotional, and mental well-being are interconnected facets of overall health, which highlight the importance of positive emotions, resilience, purpose, and supportive relationships in enabling individuals to cope with life's challenges and contribute meaningfully to their communities. Based on that description, do you feel prepared to support students in these areas? (RQ 1)  
**Follow Up:** How would you describe your overall preparedness to support the social, emotional, and mental well-being of undergraduate students in your online courses?
2. What indicators or signs do you look for when trying to identify student well-being concerns in an online setting? (RQ 1)
3. During your time at this university, what types of training or professional development have you received related to supporting student well-being? (RQ 2)
4. In what ways do you feel your training has (or has not) prepared you to support or enhance your ability to address student well-being? (RQ 2)
5. What specific strategies do you use to foster a sense of connection and belonging for students in your online courses? (RQ 3)
6. In what ways do you see students feeling accomplished or recognized in your online courses? (RQ 3)
7. In what ways do you support students in finding meaning or purpose in their academic work? (RQ 3)
8. How do you see the role of positive relationships (e.g., encouragement, motivation) in supporting your students' success online? (RQs 1,2,&3)
9. How do you promote student engagement during online learning experiences? (RQs 1,2,&3)
10. Whole Human Education™ at National University is a 360-degree holistic approach that provides academic, emotional, career, financial, and family support to ensure students thrive both in and beyond the classroom. Based on that description, how do your efforts to support students align with the principles of whole human education? (RQs 1,2,&3)

**Follow Up:** In what ways do your efforts reflect this approach, and where might they differ?

### **Semi-Structured Interview Guide**

Target Audience: Full-time educators, specializing in teaching at the undergraduate level, across a variety of disciplines, at a private institution of higher education in the western United States.

### **Opening/Introductory Questions**

1. Can you describe your role as an undergraduate educator, including your area of instruction and how you define your responsibilities in the online learning environment? (RQ 2)

**Follow Up:** How has your experience in this role shaped your approach to teaching and interacting with students online?

### **Main Questions**

2. What does “student well-being” mean to you in the context of online higher education? (RQ 1)

**Follow Up:** How does your understanding of student well-being influence the way you support your students?

3. What role do you believe faculty should play in supporting student well-being in an online learning environment? (RQ 1)

**Follow Up:** Can you share an example from your experience that illustrates your perspective on this role?

4. How prepared do you feel to support students’ social, emotional, and mental well-being in your online courses? (RQs 2&3)

**Follow Up 1 (prepared):** What experiences, resources, or training have most influenced your sense of preparedness?

**Follow Up 2 (unprepared):** Can you describe what types of support, resources, or training you believe would help you feel more equipped to support student well-being?

5. If you are willing, can you please share an experience in which you recognized a student struggling with well-being in your online course? (RQ 1)

**Follow Up:** How did you respond?

6. What other specific experiences have shaped your ability to recognize when a student may be struggling with their well-being? (RQs 2&3)

**Follow Up:** How do you typically respond when you notice signs that a student might be struggling?

7. Please describe how you typically respond when a student brings up a well-being concern in an online course? (RQs 2&3)

**Follow Up:** Can you walk me through a recent or typical situation like that?

8. What types of professional development or training have you received that focused on student well-being? (RQs 2&3)  
**Follow Up:** How has that training (or lack thereof) influenced the way you support student well-being in your courses?
9. Which aspects of your training did you find most helpful, and which areas felt insufficient or lacking? (RQs 2&3)
10. Have you received any training outside of this university that informed your approach? (RQs 2&3)  
**Follow Up (if yes):** What did that training look like?
11. Please describe a specific instance where training or institutional support helped you address a student's well-being need? (RQs 2&3)  
**Follow Up:** Based on that experience, what additional support or training do you think would better equip you to respond to student well-being concerns?
12. What kinds of institutional support do you believe would better equip you to help students manage stress, isolation, or emotional struggles? (RQ 3)  
**Follow Up:** How do you see your role, if at all, in connecting students with those kinds of supports?
13. If applicable, based on prior questionnaire responses:
  - a. In the initial questionnaire, you indicated your training was adequate. What specifically led you to feel that way? (RQ 3)
  - b. In the initial questionnaire, you indicated your training was not adequate. What additional training would help you feel better prepared? (RQ 3)
14. What specific strategies do you use to promote student engagement and positive emotion in your online courses? (RQ 1)  
**Follow Up:** How have students responded to these strategies, and what impact have you noticed, if any?
15. How do you help students develop relationships or a sense of community in your online classes? (RQ 1)  
**Follow Up 1:** What challenges, if any, have you faced in trying to foster community online?  
**Follow Up 2:** How have you addressed those challenges specifically?
16. In what ways do you encourage students to find meaning in their coursework or academic goals? (RQ 1)  
**Follow Up:** How do you know when your efforts to support students in finding meaning are effective or when they may need adjustment?
17. How do you provide opportunities for students to feel accomplished or recognized in your class? (RQ 1)  
**Follow Up 1:** How do students typically respond to those opportunities?  
**Follow Up 2:** What impact have you noticed on their engagement or confidence?

**Closing Question**

18. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience supporting student well-being in online learning environments?

## Appendix F

### Rubric for Instrumentation Evaluation

Study Title: Exploring Undergraduate Educators' Preparedness in Addressing Students' Overall Well-Being in a Post-Secondary Online Environment

Reviewer Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

*Rating: 1=Strongly Disagree, 2=Mildly Disagree, 3=Agree, 4=Mildly Agree, 5=Strongly Agree*

Criteria	Description	Rating (1-5)	Comments/Suggestions
Clarity	The questions are clearly worded and easy to understand		
Relevance	The questions are relevant to the study's research questions and objectives		
Alignment	The questions appropriately reflect the theoretical framework (e.g., PERMA)		
Flow and Organization	The order and structure of questions support logical and natural progression		
Depth and Richness	Questions are likely to elicit detailed, meaningful responses		
Redundancy	Questions are distinct and not unnecessarily repetitive		
Sensitivity and Ethics	Questions are respectful, non-leading, and appropriate in tone		
Overall Quality	The instruments are methodologically sound		

Additional Comments or Suggestions:

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## Appendix G

### Open-Ended Questionnaire Code, Category, and Theme Tables

Initial Codes	Secondary Codes
1. Feeling prepared through experience	1. Feeling prepared or partially prepared
2. Feeling partially prepared	2. Experience-based confidence
3. Feeling unprepared	3. Lack of formal training
4. Prepared within instructional role only	4. Role limitations
5. Lack of formal training	5. Referral reliance
6. Reliance on prior experience	6. Engagement patterns
7. Referring students to services	7. Academic performance indicators
8. Uncertainty about role boundaries	8. Behavioral changes
9. Caution in addressing well-being	9. Student disclosure
10. Lack of engagement	10. Attendance and participation cues
11. Missed assignments	11. Instructor presence
12. Late or poor-quality submissions	12. Communication frequency
13. Tone or language changes	13. Discussions and collaboration
14. Withdrawal or disengagement	14. Synchronous interaction
15. Student self-disclosure	15. Belonging and inclusion
16. Hostility or frustration	16. Personal outreach
17. Absence from live sessions	17. Responsiveness
18. Students going “missing”	18. Empathy
19. Frequent communication	19. Flexibility
20. Announcements and emails	20. Active listening
21. Instructor availability	21. Recognition of work
22. Office hours	22. Affirming feedback
23. Personal check-ins	23. Peer Acknowledgment
24. Discussion boards as connection space	24. Student gratitude
25. Live synchronous sessions	25. Real-world relevance
26. Breakout rooms	26. Career alignment
27. Collaborative discussions	27. Student choice
28. Setting a welcoming tone	28. Authentic learning experiences
29. Instructor presence	29. Professional development experiences
30. Affirming feedback	30. Awareness of services
31. Positive reinforcement	31. Gaps in training
32. Responsive communication	32. Desire for clearer guidance
33. Praise for effort	33. Whole human perspective
34. Validation of student experiences	34. Faculty care and presence
35. Listening to students	35. Referrals and advocacy
36. Flexibility with deadlines	36. Supporting adult learners
37. Empathy toward adult learners	
38. Feeling heard	
39. Public recognition of work	
40. Feedback on assignments	
41. Student gratitude	

42. Peer support in discussions
43. End-of-course evaluations
44. Sharing work with authentic audiences
45. Connect learning to real-world application
46. Career relevance
47. Personal interest
48. Authentic assignments
49. Student choice
50. Helping students see long-term goals
51. Relating content to lived experiences
52. Webinars and training
53. Informal faculty discussions
54. Department meetings
55. Limited or no training
56. Awareness of student services
57. Underutilization of services
58. Desire for clearer guidance
59. Role-specific professional development
60. Holistic support
61. Academic and emotional support
62. Faculty presence
63. Referrals to services
64. Empowering student voice
65. Supporting adult learners
66. Viewing students as whole people

<b>Initial Categories</b>	<b>Initial Themes</b>
1. Preparedness and role boundaries	1. Preparedness is primarily experience-based rather than training-driven
2. Indicators of student well-being	2. Student well-being concerns are identified through engagement and performance cues
3. Connection and belonging practices	3. Connection and community are fostered through consistent presence and interaction
4. Encouragement and support	4. Individualized outreach and encouragement support student well-being
5. Accomplishment and recognition	5. Recognition, feedback, and accomplishment contribute to student motivation
6. Meaning and purpose	6. Meaning and purpose are supported through real-world and personally relevant learning
7. Training and institutional support	
8. Whole human education alignment	

7. Limited training and unclear guidance constrain faculty confidence
8. Faculty view student support through a holistic, whole-learner lens

## Appendix H

### Semi-Structured Interview Code, Category, and Theme Tables

Initial Codes	Secondary Codes
1. Faculty presence in online courses	1. Barriers to community-building
2. Instructor visibility	2. Discussions as connection spaces
3. Instructor availability	3. Encouragement
4. Multiple communication channels	4. Helping students feel seen and heard
5. Timely responsiveness	5. Relationships and collaboration
6. Personal check-ins with students	6. Instructor role boundaries
7. One-to-one outreach	7. Private outreach and response
8. Early course contact	8. Recognizing distress signals
9. Ongoing instructor engagement	9. Respectful and comfortable climate
10. Building relationships with students	10. Low-stakes, authentic engagement
11. Fostering student-to-student connection	11. Opportunities for accomplishment
12. Creating a sense of community	12. Positive emotion
13. Collaborative learning experiences	13. Real-world and personal relevance
14. Discussion-based interaction	14. Strength-based, supportive feedback
15. Informal relationship building	15. A need for role-specific professional development
16. Reducing student isolation	16. Desire for clearer institutional guidance
17. Encouraging peer interaction	17. Lack of time
18. Establishing respectful classroom norms	18. Limited training for student well-being
19. Creating emotionally safe spaces	19. List of services
20. Setting a supportive course tone	20. Uncertainty about referral processes
21. Modeling respectful communication	21. Underutilized support services
22. Student comfort and trust	22. Adult-to adult communication
23. Inclusive learning environment	23. Attendance and participation signals
24. Treating students as whole adults	24. Balancing coursework with adult learners
25. Demonstrating empathy	25. Cultural awareness
26. Acknowledging students' life circumstances	26. Experience
27. Flexibility with deadlines	27. Faculty presence
28. Accommodating student needs	28. Flexibility and accommodation
29. Balancing support with boundaries	29. Follow-up
30. Recognizing disengagement	30. Juggling work, family, health, and school
31. Noticing missed assignments	31. Modality, time, and compressed term structure
32. Monitoring participation patterns	32. Respect and empathy
33. Interpreting tone and language cues	
34. Student self-disclosure of challenges	
35. Private outreach in response to concern	
36. Escalating concerns appropriately	
37. Providing encouragement	
38. Affirming student effort	
39. Positive reinforcement	
40. Supportive and affirming feedback	

41. Reframing challenges positively
42. Promoting student engagement
43. Low-stakes engagement opportunities
44. Encouraging active participation
45. Motivating continued persistence
46. Recognizing student accomplishments
47. Highlighting student work
48. Creating opportunities for success
49. Authentic assessment experiences
50. Student sense of achievement
51. Connecting learning to real-world application
52. Supporting student goals and aspirations
53. Helping students find meaning in coursework
54. Career relevance of learning
55. Perceived preparedness to support well-being
56. Lack of formal training for student well-being
57. Reliance on personal or professional experience
58. Uncertainty about institutional resources

<b>Initial Categories</b>	<b>Final Themes</b>
1. Building connection, engagement, and community	1. Building connection, engagement, and community via relationships and collaboration
2. Creating safe and supportive online classrooms	2. Helping students feel seen and heard by connecting with them individually and providing encouragement
3. Fostering meaning, motivation, growth, and accomplishment	3. Establishing safe and supportive online classrooms by creating a respectful and comfortable environment
4. Institutional systems and training gaps	4. Understanding and supporting the whole adult learner through faculty presence, empathy, and flexibility
5. Seeing and understanding the whole adult learner	5. Reducing the barriers to community-building by using discussions as connection spaces
6. Experience	6. Recognizing distress signals and using private outreach and response to address appropriately
	7. Fostering meaning, motivation, growth, and accomplishment

8. Providing low-stakes, authentic engagement as opportunities for accomplishment
9. Creating positive emotion through real-world, supportive feedback
10. The need for role-specific professional development and a desire for clearer institutional guidance
11. Limited training for student well-being, leading to uncertainty and underutilization of university support services