

# Flourishing and Well-being in the Academy: A Capabilities Approach

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Article abstract

Increased wellness and mental health strategies have been implemented across campuses in post-secondary institutions, which is reflective of the broader discourse on wellness in societies. In response to increased awareness of wellness on campuses, universities respond in various ways which include student and staff engagement surveys, academic plans that include wellness, and institutional mental health strategies. While these initiatives are important to support the communities that universities serve, such initiatives may do better if a more robust notion of wellbeing underpins these initiatives. In this paper, I draw upon Nussbaum's capabilities to broaden the discourse on wellbeing in academia. I argue that considering wellbeing through a capabilities approach may provide a better normative framework to address more substantive tensions that undermine academics' well-being.

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# *Flourishing and Well-Being in the Academy: A Capabilities Approach*

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*Abstract: Increased wellness and mental health strategies have been implemented across campuses in post-secondary institutions, reflective of the broader discourse on mental health and wellness in society. University responses have included student and staff engagement surveys, academic plans that include wellness, and institutional mental health strategies. Although these initiatives are important to support the communities that universities serve, such initiatives may do better if a more robust notion of well-being underpinned them. In this paper, I draw upon Nussbaum's capabilities approach to broaden the discourse on well-being in academia. I argue that considering well-being through this approach may provide a better normative framework to address more substantive tensions that undermine academics' well-being.*

Awareness of, and public discourse on, mental health and wellness are increasingly prominent issues on university campuses (Russell-Mayhew et al., 2017). This prominence parallels a larger public debate about the causes of mental health distress and remedies for wellness. Discourses that target students specifically address mental health issues that include reduced resilience, compromised independence and autonomy, and increased burdens and life complexity within the larger social context. Similarly, mental health and stress leaves for faculty members on university campuses are usually attributed to workload, the instrumentalist trend in academia, the increasingly technocratic or administrative nature of the profession, and the general reduced nature of academic freedom given internal and external constraints (e.g., government oversight, narrowing parameters of research funding).

Given these factors, institutional responses have commonly involved enhanced awareness about mental health and wellness, support and wellness services for students and staff, and targeted mental health strategies (El Ansari et al., 2011; Hartman & Darab, 2012; Okanagan Charter, 2015; Polat, Ozen, Kahraman, & Bostanoglu, 2015; Shaheen, Nassar, Amre, & Hamdan-Mansour, 2015). I am not positing that wellness initiatives, particularly mental wellness strategies, are not important. These steps are commendable and necessary to address the current strain on individuals, but they are insufficient for well-being. I wish to expand upon this debate as an expository exercise in conceptualizing a holistic notion of well-being within the broader context of what it means to flourish. For instance, many helpful articles can be found on social media sites for academics to assist them in being more proactive on issues of work–life balance, workload, stress, and avoiding burnout. Illustrative is one such post that offers four quick tips: take time off, if only for an evening; remember that your job is a job—even if you love it; find ways to say no; and choose sleep over extra class-prep time (Gooblar, 2018, paras. 10–14). Although such advice is well-intentioned, it undermines the very nature of well-being, compressed into short-term, quick

“fixes,” which tend to focus on the intensification of workload rather than on the root of what it means to live well. Ironically, for academics to do their job well, they often forego the things that create wellness in their own lives—feeling the burden to always write, always respond, and always work day and night. In many cases, academics perceive that they cannot even attempt the quick fixes when the institutional conditions are absent.

I do not wish to negate or challenge the wellness strategies mentioned above.<sup>1</sup> All of them may bolster individual and collective wellness on university campuses. But I argue that universities are tasked with a more encompassing moral duty to protect and promote well-being, beyond mental health initiatives. There is an implicit assumption that the task of academics is to enhance the human condition and extend human imagination for the betterment of society and human civilization. At an international conference on health-promoting universities and colleges, the Okanagan Charter articulated that “higher education institutions are positioned to generate, share and implement knowledge and research findings to enhance health of citizens and communities both now and in the future” (2015, p. 5). If this is one of a university’s fundamental purposes, then the role of promoting well-being should be central to the ethos, culture, and mandate of higher education, for those both within the university and beyond in the broader community and society.

For the purposes of this paper, I focus on what it means to create conditions for the academy to flourish, specifically academic faculty members. Well-being is also a priority for students and administrative staff in higher education—clearly, it affects all who inhabit a university campus and beyond. However, I limit this discussion to academics as I believe that the rationale and reasoning for students and staff may have different nuances and emphases. Critics might contend that well-being is an unnecessary component to secure for academics who lead a particularly privileged life; they are perceived to be (and in many cases are) well-compensated, have flexible hours, and are paid to think. Those realities vary from institution to institution, but arguably the academy holds positional advantage over other workplaces. I start from the premise that well-being is a precondition for the ability of academics to fulfil their roles and responsibilities in cultivating new knowledge and understanding. Well-being requires a more robust conception that goes beyond work–life balance or simply a means of achieving happiness<sup>2</sup> or satisfaction, which is commonly presented within a narrower conceptual framework (for instance, see Bok, 2010). Rather, I conceive of well-being as flourishing, which entails “striving to achieve a life that lacks no activity that would make it better or more complete” (Nussbaum, 1997, p. 119).

I present some of the overarching principles that underpin Nussbaum’s capabilities approach as a way to frame notions of well-being in higher education. Following this overview, I draw upon four capabilities that have particular importance for the extent of one’s well-being in academia: senses, imagination and thought; practical reason; affiliation; and control over environment. I conclude by suggesting that wellness initiatives on campuses must include not only the aspects of mental well-being and workload, but more robust notions of well-being and flourishing.

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<sup>1</sup> I would be a hypocrite if I condemned such actions, as I have explicitly and expressly supported such initiatives in my administrative capacities. Such initiatives are essential to address the growing need for student, faculty, and staff wellness on campus.

<sup>2</sup> Sen, for instance, critiques using happiness as a framework as it is “basically a mental state, and it ignores other aspects of a person’s well-being” (1984, p. 188).

## Capabilities Approach

The capabilities approach is a broad normative framework for evaluating the flourishing of individuals and their social arrangements, which assists in the development of policies and recommendations for social change. For instance, the government of Scotland drew upon the capabilities approach to evaluate the role of public services for Scottish communities by considering current service effectiveness and interventions for better public service delivery in the country (Brunner & Watson, 2015). The capabilities approach provides a way to make two key distinctions about how individuals can draw upon their resources and what opportunities that might afford them. The first key principle is that of functionings. Functionings are “the actual living that people manage to achieve” (Sen, 1999, p. 73); the ability to “do something” in one’s life. Functionings vary from the basic features of living, such as eating, walking, or playing, to the complex activities that individuals carry out that hold value to them, whether that be in their work, their pastime activities, or the interactions that they have with others in their daily lives. Capabilities, the second key principle, are distinct from functionings in that they are the opportunities to pursue activities that hold value. They require more than simply a negative freedom—the absence of restrictive state action—that depends on the structural and local contextual conditions. In the case of academics, capability might require reserving time for a person to cultivate new knowledge, or a change of policy that provides more agency or autonomy. “A person’s capability refers to the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve. Capability is thus a kind of freedom: the substantive freedom to achieve alternative function combinations” (Sen, 1999, p. 75). This normative framework does not simply evaluate the current state of utility or economic status, but rather the freedoms that people deem valuable to their lives, to remove the barriers that may limit their capability to attain such opportunities.

This difference between functionings and capabilities is an important distinction in the conceptualization of well-being, illustrated in the following example. Consider two individuals who are not eating. Patty has decided to fast as part of her commitment to her faith. Suzy is homeless, has no food to eat, and is starving. If we look only to Patty and Suzy’s functionings, the story suggests a similar output because neither is eating. However, if we consider the notion of capabilities, Patty has the capability to choose whether to eat or not, whereas Suzy does not have the capability to make such a decision. A bystander might conclude that Patty is better off because she has both the functioning and the capability to decide whether to eat or not, and Suzy is worse off. An individual’s opportunity and freedom to decide how best to lead their life and hold to particular values are important. The distinction between formal and substantive freedoms is notable here. For instance, any individual has the formal freedom to apply for a job, but some people will not have the substantive freedom of access to computers to draft a resume. Some individuals will not have appropriate interview clothes, or have not been socialized into the norms required to navigate job interviews. The formal freedom suggests that anyone can apply, but the substantive freedoms are the real opportunities to pursue and potentially attain such a goal.

In a similar vein, academics ostensibly receive many formal freedoms, but the chasm is vast between formal and substantive freedoms. Everyone is free to publish and conduct research, for instance, but depending on one’s tenured rank, the priorities of the institution, the level of judgment or autonomy, and the mandates by the state, one may have more or fewer substantive freedoms to conduct particular forms of research. Walker (2008) poignantly makes this distinction in the post-secondary context. Resources

such as bursaries, scholarships, and staff–student ratio are important but insufficient as they are simply capability inputs: “Education development involves more than access to equal resources; it means the expansion of human capability” (Walker, 2010, p. 900). In Sen’s words, capabilities are “the freedoms they actually enjoy to choose the lives that they have reason to value” (1992, p. 81). For the academic, the conditions and scholarly environment either expand or inhibit their agency. I argue that an academic who lacks agency will necessarily have their scholarly ideas stultified. It is thus indispensable and critical to evaluate the substantive opportunities (capabilities) that one has. One cannot simply consider flourishing in a broad sense unless one’s capabilities—the real and valuable opportunities that one can pursue—align with the actualization (the functionings) of such opportunities.

Sypnowich contends that social conditions are necessarily connected and must be aligned with both capabilities and functionings: “We must attend to the levels of flourishing of individuals to determine whether shortfalls in flourishing are the result of conditions that can and ought to be improved by public policy” (2005, p. 64). The capabilities approach, then, is a direct challenge to previous metrics to gauge the well-being of individuals and states through top-down, economic evaluations and utilitarian principles (Sen, 1992, 1999, 2002). It expands the notion of well-being beyond individualistic metrics of skills, competencies, and the autonomous individual (Stephenson & Weil, 1992) to provide a more nuanced evaluative framework for discerning what individuals are actually able to do and be. It emphasizes the agency and effective opportunities of individuals. This normative framework provides “an alternative conceptualization of the very purpose of public policy. ... It is best thought of not as offering a detailed road map for policy, but as providing fundamental principles that guide policy development” (Orton, 2011, p. 358). Sen describes the evaluative normative framework as follows:

How individuals lead their lives will be as diverse and unique as snowflakes themselves, but the underpinning dispositions of the capabilities are an essential criterion in one’s cultivation of wellbeing. The approach provides underpinning principles that shift the ways in which we evaluate one’s wellbeing from outputs and accountability metrics that may overlook aspects of human diversity and the “actual opportunities a person has.” (2009, p. 253)

At this point, one may challenge in two ways the starting premise that applying capabilities to the expectations and obligations of an academic may conflict with other competing priorities of the role of higher education, particularly regarding the question of which activities hold value. First, one may argue that the role of an academic does not include that authority, and that an instrumentalist view of education is an appropriate stance and an obligation. Second, by conceding empowerment to individuals by making them the arbiters of what is deemed valuable, the principles that underpin the capabilities approach may be viewed as a form of subjective relativism. I start from the premise that part of the overarching purpose of higher education is to cultivate and create the conditions for expanding human understanding and knowledge for the betterment of all. There is little doubt that universities also have an important logistical and practical role in preparing individuals for employment and advancement in society, but there is an equally important role in being attentive to what it means to create meaningful lives. This critical aspect makes a university not simply an agent of government policy. Arguably, universities seek to develop a culture and ethos that is critical, imaginative, and academically independent of both government and institutional power bases. Of course, universities must necessarily work collaboratively and respectfully with government and other external stakeholders, but the hallmark of a modern university is to have some critical distance to challenge, evoke, and disrupt the replication of ideas.

Nussbaum (2010) notes that the increasingly instrumentalist, outputs-based, economic growth mindset in higher education has come at the cost of a problematic shift away from the humanities and the dispositions that the humanities hold. Moving away from the critical thinking and reflective dispositions that call for the cultivation of ideas, knowledge, and creative capacity for sustaining and maintaining a vibrant democracy is an imminent threat to the overarching aims and purposes of the university. This does not mean, however, that one mindset cannot support the other. Flourishing requires both.

We are not forced to choose between a form of education that promotes profit and a form of education that promotes good citizenship. A flourishing economy requires the same skills that support citizenship, and thus the proponents of what I shall call “education for profit” ... have adopted an impoverished concept of what is required to meet their own goal. (Nussbaum, 2010, p. 10)

As such, there is not a subjective relativism or a simplified stance of “anything goes.” On the contrary, there is an attentive balance to attend to the multiple demands of academia, knowing that it serves the common good of society, the potential for advanced economic growth, and the stability and sustainability of civil society. Yet it must also do the work of critical engagement of cultivating new ideas and knowledge, which requires a particular agency and substantive freedoms.

If agency and critical engagement are central to the cultivation of knowledge creation and mobilization, then there is merit in highlighting these capabilities in the context of academia. I draw from Nussbaum’s (2011) ten capabilities that are essential for human flourishing. The basic assumption of these capabilities is that one need not have all ten to have well-being, and yet one cannot simply trade between the various capabilities. Basic capabilities, such as life and health, will necessarily affect some of the more complex capabilities, such as agency, substantive freedoms, and empowerment. Nussbaum argues that the central capabilities are “the ones that a minimally just society will endeavour to nurture and support” (2011, p. 28). They should not be considered merely instrumental but have value in and of themselves; without them, one could not begin to lead a flourishing life. Other capabilities, such as practical reason and affiliation, will necessarily impact one’s ability for any further substantive freedoms. For instance, not having practical reason and affiliation would significantly impede upon one’s well-being because without them, an individual would not have the critical capacity and belonging to pursue activities and opportunities of personal value.

Let us return to the primary question posed in this paper regarding well-being in higher education to see how the principles of the capabilities approach may shift the lens through which we consider well-being amongst academics. Assuming that individuals have the basic capabilities to function at a university, I contend that there are four capabilities of particular weight that may positively or negatively impact one’s well-being in relation to being an academic:

- *Sense, imagination, and thought*: being able to imagine, think and reason in a “truly human” way, and having the education necessary to exercise these capabilities.
- *Practical reason*: being able to form a conception of the good and engage in critical reflection about the planning of one’s life.
- *Affiliation*:
  - Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings.

- Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being with equal worth.
- *Control over environment:*
  - *Political:* being able to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life. (Nussbaum, 2000, pp. 78–80)

I propose using these four capabilities as an alternative approach to evaluating well-being in the academy, and contend that the modern university must enable these four capabilities to create the conditions for a flourishing scholarly environment.<sup>3</sup>

One might assume that the nature of academia fosters the conditions to have many capabilities with substantive freedoms to pursue the opportunities the profession espouses. The ability to pursue an academic career is arguably a complex and highly desirable capability in and of itself, and outsiders of the profession may be skeptical of academics' lack of well-being given their privileged place in society. The focus does not draw upon a utilitarian principle of happiness,<sup>4</sup> as such a view does not consider adaptive preferences that can reinforce injustice or inequities.

The utilitarian approach has an integral focus on agency; that is, individuals' ability to choose and to act, to be autonomous and to make decisions on their terms and that they value towards a purposeful, goal directed activity; and also on diversity and difference. (Brunner & Watson, 2015, p. 6)

In a profession that is acknowledged to value agency, autonomy, and purposeful, goal-directed activity, academics may have a heightened sense of lacking the capabilities to function well if these values are not protected and fostered within the institution, or if there is a disconnect.

To understand this contradiction more broadly in terms of an academic's interests and those of the institution, it is important to consider the tensions between the aims of higher education. Collini contends that four characteristics of modern universities often define the nature and purpose of the institution:

1. That it provides some form of post-secondary school education where "education" signals something more than professional training.
2. That it furthers some form of advanced scholarship or research whose character is not wholly dictated by the need to solve immediate practical problems.
3. That these activities are pursued in more than just one single discipline or very tightly defined cluster of disciplines.
4. That it enjoys some form of institutional autonomy as far as its intellectual activities are concerned. (2012, p. 7)

In this way, university does not attend to instrumental means, but is more broadly conceived as one of *extending human understanding* (Newman, 1907/2001). There is an undeniable tension at play then between the role of the university to address and solve immediate contemporary problems, and the broader ideal of advancing knowledge and understanding of ourselves in relation to our world that may or may not have an immediate output that can be consumed by the public. This institutional contradiction

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<sup>3</sup> One might argue that other capabilities might easily be included in this list. For example, I pondered whether play is a requisite capability for academics. In the end, when I considered the capability of play in an academic context, I believed that I was thinking of it more in the context of sense, imagination, and thought.

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Layard's happiness agenda (as cited in Sen, 2009, pp. 273–275).

of the primary purposes of higher education may inevitably create angst in academics' own capabilities. The priority given by individuals and their requisite institutions, coupled with the obligations or pressures by the state, whether through funding or allocation of resources, may all impinge on one's capabilities. Given this inevitable and irreconcilable tension, I now consider the four capabilities to see how they may inform and provide insight to the well-being of academia.

### **Sense, Imagination, and Thought**

Among the assumptions that draw many an academic to the profession is the promise and potential to imagine, think, and reason for the purposes of cultivating, creating, and disseminating new ideas. Arguably, the creative senses, imagination, and thought are at the forefront of the work that academics undertake, commonly to advance or improve upon the lives of others.

Interesting tensions fundamental to the contested principles underpinning the aims of higher education affect the potential well-being of academics. As I noted in the previous section, one tension is between balancing the aim to extend human understanding and enhancing the economic and life prospects of graduates. This tension harkens back to the primary aims of the modern university. For many students, university is a means to obtain the skills, dispositions, and competencies with which to pursue a profession or career. In this way, universities serve as an instrumental means for students to better their economic prospects. Put another way, students attend university and study to attain the marks (an instrumental goal) needed to graduate and obtain a desired career (a capability). The teaching required by faculty to accomplish this important goal, however, necessarily reduces their own capability to pursue research that may cultivate new knowledge or ideas. Both ideals are important and necessary functions of the university, but they are in tension nonetheless.

A second tension exists between academic autonomy or intellectual freedom and the obligation to serve the needs of the community and society (because universities are often funded, at least partially, by the state). For instance, few tasks create more animosity and resentment among academics than seeking out research grants from large government agencies and research foundations to support their work. Robinson contends that the processes used by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council—arguably one of the most prestigious and well-regarded research agencies in Canada—is “protracted, opaque and unaccountable” (2013, para. 1). This perception has some warrant. Baum, Dodd, Tietjen, and Kerr note the shift in research dollars from fundamental research to applied research. Fundamental research is “the pursuit of knowledge and understanding of humanity or the natural world without consideration for an end product” (Baum et al., 2017, p. 1). In contrast, applied research “seeks to use existing knowledge—discovered through fundamental or use-inspired research—to develop practical solutions to specific challenges” (Baum et al., 2017, p. 6).<sup>5</sup> In their report, they note that Canada has seen a significant decline in funding for fundamental research by the Tri-Council agencies (Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council, Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and Canadian Institutes of Health Research). The concern posed is that fundamental research is a necessary precondition for any applied research. As Nobel laureate George Porter posited, “[t]o feed applied science by starving basic science is like economizing on the foundations of a building so that it may be built

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<sup>5</sup> Use-inspired research “understands the phenomena and processes that are required to address long-term societal challenges. For example, the capacity for certain chemicals to interact with proteins to produce effects that might reduce the prospects for survival of an organism” (Baum et al., 2017, p. 6).



higher. It is only a matter of time before the whole edifice crumbles” (1985, as cited in Baum et al., 2017, p. 6). Fundamental research provides the basis of creativity and innovation for thinking anew, and without it, overall research excellence is fundamentally undermined. Yet, in the search for government priorities and community needs, the perception is that funds must target specific initiatives and priorities identified by such research agencies. This situation creates a tension between the role of the university going beyond just solving immediate, practical problems and the stakeholders who control and direct which research will be funded.

A third tension exists between exploration of ideas and the requirement to show evidence of impact (both in the short and long term). Academics are now routinely called upon to demonstrate the impact of their work in society. The most common form of measuring one’s impact is to indicate the number of times a paper has been used or applied based on the number of author citations. The h-index, for instance, is one such metric defined as follows:

A scientist has index  $h$  if  $h$  of his/her  $N_p$  papers have at least  $h$  citations each, and the other  $(N_p - h)$  papers have no more than  $h$  citations each. This means that an author can only achieve an h-index of 50 if they have published at least 50 times and 50 or more of their publications have at least 50 citations each. (Ravenscroft, Liakata, Clare, & Duma, 2017, para. 7)

Ravenscroft et al. (2017) contend that the h-index is a narrow parameter of impact as citation ratings may falsely correlate to research impact. For instance, citations of the journal article may be skewed by academic self-citation (Bartneck & Kokkermans, 2011; Meho, 2007), the articles may be incorrectly double-counted in various repositories, and the article itself may not link to the particular individual or institution that made the significant research impact. In the case of journal citations, impact is narrowly defined by number of hits and citation rates, rather than on the broader effect that the research has on the public. When research is defined within specific parameters such as citation ratings, it may skew the ways in which academics disseminate their research, opting for institutional mechanisms of evaluation rather than other mechanisms, such as the betterment of a particular community. The need to demonstrate impact that is measurable and countable may reduce other forms of impact geared toward advancing understanding. This trend thus creates uncertainty for academics who may feel torn by how one’s senses, imagination, and thought are prioritized to meet the multiple and sometimes conflicting demands of the profession.

Gutmann argues that one of the factors contributing to making a university education worthwhile is *creative understanding*, the ability “to understand ... [the] world creatively and constructively” (2015, p. 14). Within this broad definition is the capacity to understand and respond creatively to complex social problems. Gutmann suggests that this notion goes beyond the conventional boundaries of liberal arts education to a greater conceptual understanding of how the theoretical and professional blur. In this view, creative understanding is not relegated to a specific liberal arts or ethics course, but rather encompasses a more expansive notion of the creative spirit and imagination. “Separating the two spirits is a means of stifling rather than stoking creative understanding, since so much that provokes our creative understanding straddles the worlds of theory and practice, and the professions are a large part of both worlds” (Gutmann, 2015, p. 20). This line of reasoning parallels the earlier claims made by Baum et al. (2017) on the need for balance between fundamental and applied research. Creativity, innovation, risk, and imagination need not have an immediate output or measured impact, but they do require space for deliberation and thought.

Creative understanding does not itself require an automatic pay off, although academics must remain cognizant of the concomitant responsibility of research to make a positive difference in the world. How creative understanding ought to be cultivated is thus mired in this dynamic and flux state. Waller's study of schools articulated this perennial issue (with parallels to higher education) in that the institution is "a despotism in a state of perilous equilibrium ... threatened from within and exposed to regulation from without ... resting upon children, at once the most intractable and most unstable members of the community" (1932, p. 10). Higgins (2011) contends that this precarious equilibrium creates a vicious circle of heteronomy whereby the school is continually threatened by its autocratic nature, and it has to be autocratic because it is continually threatened. To challenge this constricting learning environment, Higgins has called for a purposefulness against an anti-intellectualist environment that sets up issues as problems and answers, as if they were nuts and bolts, rather than creating the genuine intellectual conditions that would allow an academic to deeply explore "matters of genuine human concern, [and be] someone who prizes complexity, open questions, and genuine insight" (2011, p. 255).

If creative understanding, imagination, and thought are central to the role of academics, then there is a strong correlation between one's sense of flourishing and these dispositions. Arguably, a primary reason for entering the profession is to have the space for conversations and critical thought about the complex ideas that affect our lives and the world around us. A primary role of academics is to cultivate these dispositions as part of the profession. Conversely, a narrow instrumentalist view indicated by metrics and outputs, or to the immediacy of the short-term problem, has the potential to create an anti-intellectualist environment. This impinges on our capability as academics to flourish and to live well in the context of our professional lives in universities.

## Practical Reason

As part of leading a flourishing life, there is the central task of practical reasoning: being able to conceive of the good and critically reflect on one's life. One's values, judgments, and experiences arguably affect this ability. The process of practical reasoning is never exact or numerical, but rather is an individual assessment of which things are of more weight or value than others in reaching a desired goal. This hierarchy is subject to change.

Practical reasoning appraises the contribution of each different end to the desired final end; it assesses the actual situation against the draft of our plans of life in order to make the required concrete decision. The desired final end is the point of reference considered by practical reason in order to rank and thus compare the different ends. (Crespo, 2012, p. 68)

That said, practical wisdom is not simply about discerning which human ends are valuable. It is also the capacity to discern which actions and responses are conducive to those ends, which are necessarily informed by the particular context in which such judgements are made. Drawing from Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*, this capacity entails an attentiveness to the moral virtues that guide practical wisdom. For an academic, too much value on the wrong things (e.g., self-pursuit or self-gratification without the requisite obligations toward the betterment of the students, the institution, or society) may indicate a lack of moral virtue, misguiding and misdirecting what is valuable in the context of academia. Aristotle made a useful distinction between virtue and cleverness:

There is a capacity, called cleverness, which is such as to be able to do the actions that tend to promote whatever goal is assumed and to attain them. If, then, the goal is fine, cleverness is praiseworthy, and the goal is base, cleverness is unscrupulousness. That is why both [practically wise] and unscrupulous people are called clever. [Practical wisdom] is not cleverness, though it requires this capacity. (trans. 1976, 1144a25-30)

It is thus entirely possible for an individual to be clever but not practically wise. Stohr captured this idea well:

One might well be good at determining the best means to an end without having any knowledge of the real value of that end. But, crucially, it is impossible to be practically wise in the fullest sense without also being clever. (2006, pp. 205–206)

Framed as such, a moral compass requires individuals not only to have the requisite skills to act in a particular way, but to do what is required to *act well* in a given situation. This concept of knowing how to act well refutes a kind of subjective relativism, to be adept in the complex academic requirements that go beyond narrow self-interest, to understand the multiple duties that come with one's privileged academic status. There is thus an expanding of one's experience and understanding of the world—a particular broadening of perspective that goes beyond oneself. In so doing, an individual who has both practical wisdom and moral virtue can better reflect on the effect of their actions in relation to the world and other people.

Cultivating an academy that, by its nature, values the notion of practical reason as a condition of individual capabilities relies to a large extent on trusting the intuition and judgements of those individuals. Although some temperance is required to not simply allow individuals to do as they please without any accountability at all, the shift toward practical reason shifts the gaze to valuing the work of academics as an ongoing and changing process. There is an inherent trust in providing a space where practical reason is appropriate, particularly when the academy is concerned.

[Individual agents] can deliberate, in the light of the good and the possible, about ends, about the constituents of ends, and about the means to ends. Somehow, despite the intractability and uncertainty of the subject-matter of choice, agents do arrive at judgments about what is worthwhile or what can or cannot be done in pursuit of what. And somehow, from out of all this, they arrive at shared, partly inexplicit norms of reasonableness. (Wiggins, 2002, pp. 373–374)

This practice does not always require a radical shift in processes, or an active resistance to other priorities, but some level of compromise and attentiveness to being nimble to different situations or contexts is warranted. In shifting the lens of the work that academics undertake when entering this profession, valuing research and other work “nurture[s] a social and moral consciousness among those with the privilege of university education in an unequal society” (Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015, p. 320). There is thus a critical discursive element between practical reasoning and agency that requires a nuanced reflection on complex situations as they arise. For, without the capability for practical reason and the agency to take such a reflective stance, there is a disempowering element that will necessarily impede one's flourishing. I return to this element in the final section, Control of One's Environment.

## Affiliation

Affiliation is a multipronged disposition in how individuals conceptualize and build capacity for connections that create meaning in their lives. At a theoretical level, the notion of affiliation is defined quite broadly and ambiguously. One might state that, at the most basic level, affiliation addresses the levels of social support that are required for someone's flourishing to be better or worse. Such social supports or affiliations are as diverse as are the capabilities themselves. For instance, social, political, and professional affiliations may be woven into people's interpersonal relations and commitments to individuals and groups. These affiliations are not neatly defined or categorized, but overlap, blur, shift, and evolve, as do the lives of individuals themselves. The important dispositions are the quality of the affiliations themselves that are necessary to live well. In this sense, Nussbaum notes that affiliation requires two broad considerations:

- a. Being able to live with and toward others, to recognize and show concern for other human beings.
- b. Having the social bases of self-respect and non-humiliation; being able to be treated as a dignified being with equal worth. (2011, pp. 76–77)

At the most fundamental level, these affiliations remind us of our human connectedness and the interdependent nature of humankind. There is an ethical and moral dimension to this interdependence - a particular kind of dignity and worth that comes from having positive affiliations with others. Affiliations help to affirm our own recognition and validation of how our lives add meaning to the lives of others. Mutuality and reciprocity arise in the care and concern that we show one another, and our affiliation with one another improves our well-being.

This outcome is unsurprising and generally taken for granted. The ways in which we cultivate belonging, care, and commitments in light of our affiliations with others contribute to our own flourishing. Through these multiple, meaningful, sustained, and intersecting affiliations, individuals may increase their capabilities. Given this weight on the capacity to increase our capabilities through these positive affiliations, conversely it is true that limited or negative affiliations will have an inverse effect on our well-being. The quality of social norms and practices within the academic institution will necessarily impact the well-being of the inhabitants therein.<sup>6</sup> There is indeed a concern that the nature of academia can heighten elements of isolation or competitiveness that are detrimental both to one's well-being and ironically to the progression of new knowledge. In this sense, the institution has an explicit and purposeful role to ensure as best as possible "affirmative material and institutional support, not simply a failure to impede" (Nussbaum, 2003a, p. 38).

Building on this, idea Nussbaum (2011) provides an interesting distinction between *internal* and *combined* capabilities. Internal capabilities are those capabilities that are available and present to the individual. Combined capabilities are those capabilities that require external conditions to be present. Although the quality of affiliations may arise informally and in the daily work of academics, there can be a narrowing of affiliations dependent on the institution's ethos and culture to foster respectful collaborative learning environments. If there is a perception of fear and anxiety, exacerbated by pressure

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<sup>6</sup> Although I focus on well-being in the academy, broader issues of affiliations beyond academics are relevant, including the teacher–student relationship, professional associations, and governance structures (see Garnett, 2009; Walker, 2008).

on the individual academic to compete for positional advantage among peers or in the profession, then there is a danger that the quality of affiliations will be reduced in such circumstances. Well-being in academia may be compromised seriously by the disincentive to create robust affiliations if they necessarily compromise one's academic progression. For instance, if an individual perceives that working collaboratively takes more time and creates impediments to the quality of work given the constraints (colleagues may not have the same work ethic, or have different writing styles or timelines for outputs), it may be easier to research independently without the unknowns of the others' research habits.

The institution, then, is obligated to cultivate conditions that foster the self-respect and non-humiliation of its academic members that are critical to this capability. The academic critique of one's work ought to be attentive to the effect that it has on the individual. Critique aimed at the research ought to have a purposeful and expressed intent of promoting self-exploration and further understanding; conversely, critique that demeans, undermines, or impedes further refinement is both unproductive to the work and dehumanizing to the academic. Meaningful affiliations further require the preconditions of trust and collaboration to allow academics to find purpose and meaning in their professional work, which in turn positively impact their personal well-being. If an academic has "the internal capabilities to handle academic work, but the [external] conditions in the institution to enhance her capabilities are missing or constrained," well-being will be compromised (Walker & Unterhalter, 2007, p. 11). The relational aspect of internal and combined capabilities is a central social condition for flourishing. To flourish and to act in a moral way would be to live, act, and reason with others according to these human values, behaving in certain ways that make a human a good human being. Thus, there is a relational flourishing and dual role that is played in the academy; a role of both justice and morality that exists not just for one's personal well-being, but for the well-being of others, too.

### **Control of One's Environment**

In this last section, I focus on the final criterion of conditions that add to an academic's capability to flourish: control of one's environment. Specifically, I refer to the ability to participate effectively in political choices that govern one's life. I take a broader interpretation to consider the informal and formal norms, practices, and governance structure that affect an academic's ability to control their environment. Traditionally, much debate has hovered around intellectual and academic freedom: the ability to produce new thoughts and ideas without recourse from the institution or state. There is indeed a tension regarding the parameters and limits of what academia entails, and I do not wish to go into it here. Regardless of the formal conditions, academics arguably require a more basic set of substantive freedoms in order to exercise academic freedom (Glenn, 2010). I assume that different academics' conceptions of intellectual and academic freedom will necessarily impact their perceptions and capabilities to control their own environment, particularly as it pertains to their research and the professional obligations to their discipline and field.

Consider the governance and structural limitations that restrict an individual's ability to govern one's life, particularly as it pertains to academia. If we proceed from the thinking of both affiliation as a combined capability, and the other two capabilities of practical reason and creativity, sense, and imagination, a clear theme of agency is apparent and central to academia. In this context, agency requires that academics are active participants and designers of their ideas and actions, which have political and

social impacts both on their understanding and on society. Walker and Unterhalter note this central significance:

In education we are the agents of our own learning (or failure to learn) of others, and the recipients of others' agency. Agency deserves our attention in the way it potentially enables us to imagine and act toward new ways of being. For Sen (1999), to be actively involved in shaping one's own life and having opportunities to reflect on this is critical for positive social change. Agency is intrinsically important for individual freedom . . . but also instrumental for collective action and democratic participation. (2007, p. 6)

Given the weight of this capability, there is clear relevance about the role of agency within the larger overarching capability of controlling one's environment. Agency does not mean that there is a tyranny of an "anything goes" approach to academia. Clearly, the privileged place in the academic institution and society means that there must be some attentiveness to the kinds of meaningful work that an academic embarks upon. For instance, an academic would be hard-pressed to suggest that years upon years of thinking about an esoteric point creates a clear sense of agency for that individual, with little to no nuanced perspective on that person's collective responsibility to the academy. Yet, in resisting external pressure to make the topic less esoteric and more relevant in any way, the academic may be fulfilling the obligation to the rest of society to try to advance knowledge and understanding without necessarily being driven by the short-term payoffs that other research affords. For many academics, their own agency has lessened and been pushed to the periphery.

The concerns that undermine an academic's control over their environment can be seen in the discourse regarding free speech and academic freedom on campuses. These concerns harken to the reduction of research funds and evaluative metrics that funding agencies rely on. Lack of control is commonly felt over the mechanisms of evaluation for promotion and tenure, and annual performance reviews (Hyttén, 2017). To cultivate better control of one's environment in the academy requires going beyond the all-too-common rhetoric of "creating transparency"—a red herring for many who view the environment as anything but transparent or inclusive. A genuine and authentic scholarly environment is imperative for academics to create meaning and understanding in the pursuit of their research programs and for the betterment of themselves and in service to the public.

## Conclusion

The impetus to write this article was my unease with how well-being is largely conceptualized within mental health discourses without a more robust discussion about the principles of well-being that are arguably critical to academics. I contend that there is value in drawing upon these capabilities to reframe the discourse around wellness and well-being. As I have discussed, the principles of sense, imagination and thought, practical reason, affiliation, and control over environment are critical to the life of an academic. One might argue that these capabilities are preconditions for the nature of work that academics undertake in the cultivation and dissemination of new ideas and thought. Critics of these broader capabilities may argue that the normative recommendations arising from such frameworks often prove to be aspirational, towards an ideal of how we might get closer to well-being and flourishing. Further, placed in nonideal contexts, the particularities and circumstances create a complexity and nuance for how

the post-secondary institution can cultivate and enhance individual and collective well-being. That said, as I have argued throughout, the capabilities approach offers an interruption to this debate by making explicit key capabilities at the fore of such discussions. When tensions arise, as they inevitably do, they compromise one's capabilities to flourish in the academic institution.

Although it would be unrealistic to suggest that we can remove all such impediments given the multiple and conflicting purposes of our academic roles, there is a requisite obligation on the part of universities to be mindful of these broader policies and practices that impact the well-being of academics. The corollary is that the internal well-being of academia will affect the broader communities we serve; flourishing within our own educational environments arguably “enables flourishing in other aspects of our lives and in the lives of others, beyond education” (Wilson-Strydom & Walker, 2015, p. 311).

Well-being and flourishing in academia necessarily rely on the core values and commitments of modern universities: that knowledge goes beyond professional training, that advanced scholarship need not always solve immediate practical problems, that there is a fluidity between disciplines to challenge the boundaries of understanding, and that there is some form of institutional autonomy (Collini, 2012). If these overarching principles are eroded, then arguably so are the capabilities to pursue activities that hold value for academics. Well-being depends on the structural and contextual conditions to cultivate a scholarly environment.

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