



# INDIGENOUS WELL-BEING MODEL

By Shawn Secatero, Ph.D.

## INTRODUCTION

I remember conducting an oral history project on the Canonicito Navajo Reservation during the mid 1990s. I was often concerned about American Indian higher education and needed some type of advice to help me succeed in my master's program. I interviewed a Navajo elder and asked him, "What words of advice would you offer our younger generations who plan on attending college?" He answered, "I would tell them to remember who they are, where they are from and where they are going in life." Furthermore, the elder explained the sacredness of spiritual, mental and physical well-being and the importance of the close connections of an individual, family and community. These three elements of well-being ignited my thinking into a broader view of helping all students succeed in higher education and life endeavors. This began my research into well being.

## PURPOSE

"Why well being?" is often the question that ponders many individuals. Due to the complexity of our world and the various societies, we often become disassociated with ourselves, our loved ones and even community. Therefore, well being can be integrated as life-long learning as we progress in various stages in our life. Well being helps us to develop a better understanding of our goals, health, community and society.

Rath and Hartner (2010) refer to well being as, "The combination of our love for what we do each day, the quality of our relationships, the security of our finances, the vibrancy of our physical health, and the pride we take in what we have contributed to our communities; most importantly, its about how these five elements interact." As we envision the well being connections with all elements associated with life-long learning, we often refer to this learning process as holistic education. Miller (2009) defines holistic education as, "a philosophy of education based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to humanitarian values such as compassion and peace."

The overall purpose in developing the holistic Indigenous Well-being Model in Higher Education was to create a blueprint for college students by addressing well-being factors that include: spiritual, cultural, social, professional, mental, emotional, physical and environmental pillars. The well-being model can be used as a primary means of helping college students, practitioners and researchers in addressing issues that concern the overall wellness in life.

## BACKGROUND

The foundation of the indigenous well being model began as a dissertation study at the University of New Mexico in 2008 which is entitled, *“Beneath Our Sacred Minds, Hands, and Hearts: Stories of success and persistence factors among American Indian Graduate and professional students.”* I interviewed 23 American Indian graduate and professional level students on their success and persistence factors which also included an in-depth survey, and a short success story. Since I grew up on the Canoncito Navajo Reservation, I was raised in traditional Navajo way which was to remain in balance and harmony in life. These vital concepts are often referred to as *“Si’ahNaaghaiBik’ehHozhoon,”* which translates as *“the Beauty Way Path in life.”* This path is practiced by my elders which is essential to remain in balance in all life. Furthermore, this path includes learning how to balance spiritual, mental, social, and physical well being pillars in life.

### STAGE ONE: FOUR MAIN PILLARS OF WELL BEING



*Source: Secatero (2008); University of New Mexico  
Dissertation Study: Four pillars of Well Being*

As I continued to expand my dissertation study, the well being model encompassed four additional pillars. The cultural well being pillar was added which is strongly associated with spiritual well being. In addition, emotional well being was connected to the mental well being pillar, environmental well being was also incorporated into the physical well being pillar. Hence, the professional well being pillar was added to the social well being pillar.

## **1. SPIRITUAL WELL-BEING (PURPOSE)**

*What is my overall purpose in life?*

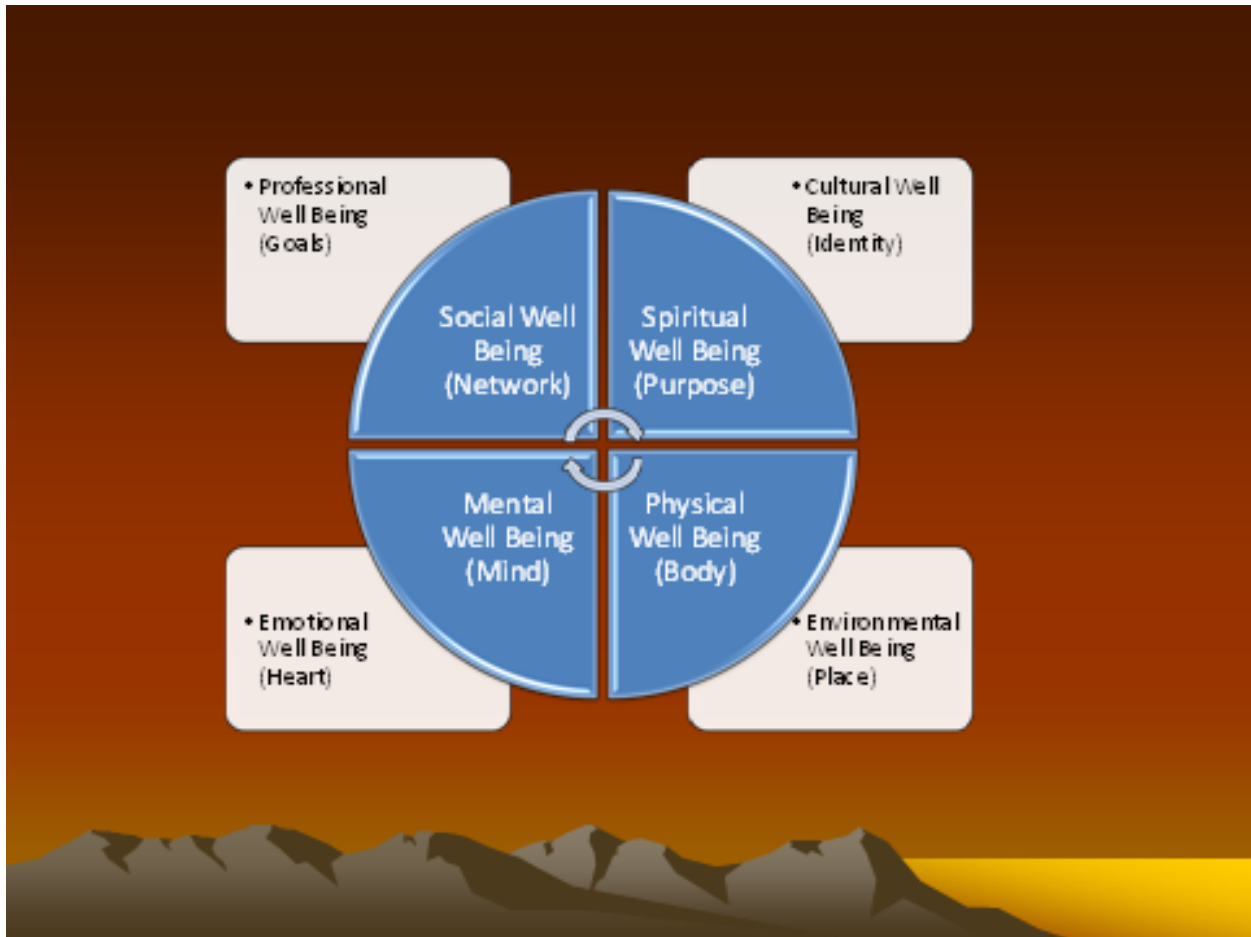
This is one of the most difficult questions that ponder many individuals in their own livelihood which is key to understanding and pursuing their life goals. This sense of purpose includes important elements, such as an individual's beliefs, happiness and balancing well-being factors in life. Examples of spiritual well-being can relate to daily prayer, self acceptance/realization, life fulfillment and remembering teachings from those in the spirit world.

## **2. CULTURAL WELL-BEING (IDENTITY)**

*Who am I?*

Cultural well-being is essential for all people and integrates knowing who you are, where you are from and where you are going in life. This formulates the issue of identity including preserving our cultures and lifeways. Identity also encompasses interpreting our past and linking our future by passing on this precious knowledge to younger generations. Examples of cultural well-being include the cultural practices, songs, Native language, rituals, artistic talent, community pride and giving back.

## **STAGE TWO: WELL BEING MODEL POST DOCTORATE STUDY**



Source: Secatero (2009) American Indian Well Being Model Pillars Stage Two

### **3. PROFESSIONAL WELL-BEING (GOALS)**

*What are my goals in life?*

Professional well-being includes a variety of factors, including the effective planning of short and long term goals. Short term goals are often associated with immediate results while long term goals correlate with life-long learning. Several concrete examples of professional well-being can include the development of skills, interests, work ethic, hobbies, financial literacy and leadership.

### **4. SOCIAL WELL-BEING (RELATION)**

*Do I have the essential communication skills to function in life?*

Social well-being is defined as, “Our ability to interact successfully within a community and throughout a variety of cultural contacts, while showing respect for ourselves and others, (WSU Well-being site, 2009). Examples of social well-being include time management, cooperation, group work, literacy skills, intimacy, dialogue with professors and students and a circle of positive friends.

### **5. MENTAL WELL-BEING (MIND)**

*How do I learn about myself and from other people?*

Mental well-being is defined as a state of well-being in which an individual realizes his or her own abilities, coping skills and learning how to think in a variety of ways. It can sometimes be referred to as “intellectual well-being,” (WSU Well-being Site, 2009). Examples of mental well-being include study skills, learning styles, problem solving, test preparation, research skills, creativity and rigor.

### **6. EMOTIONAL WELL-BEING (HEART)**

*How do I navigate my emotions in life?*

Emotional well-being allows us to recognize, understand, experience and express a full range of emotions and channel those emotions into healthy behaviors that satisfy personal and social goals, (WSU Well-being Site, 2009). Examples of emotional well-being include stress management, positive self-esteem, adaptation to change, coping skills, resiliency and anger management.

### **7. PHYSICAL BEING (BODY)**

*Am I able to care for myself and my body?*

Physical well-being can be referred to as the ability to understand what can make our body most efficient and effective and the ability to recognize and respect our own limitations, (WSU Well-being Site, 2009). Examples of physical well-being include proper diet, exercise, drug and alcohol awareness, motivation, sex education, personal hygiene, sleep and relaxation.

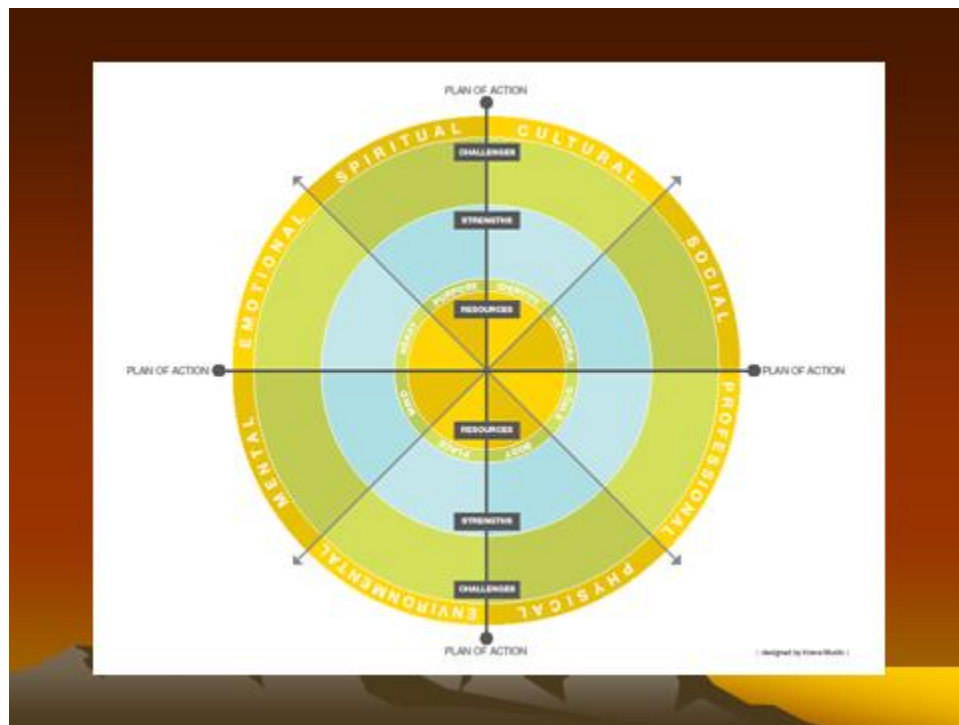
## 8. ENVIRONMENTAL WELL-BEING (PLACE)

*Is my environment ideal to accomplish what I need to do in life?*

The concept of place is vital which can include home, work, and school environments. The sense of Belonging is important because it allows us to progress in our comfort zones and to navigate our ways in life. Environmental well being can also include respect for nature including all living things, mother earth, and father sky.

### DEVELOPING A PERSONAL WELL-BEING MODEL

As part of developing a personal well-being model for higher education, I created a circle that highlights each of the eight well-being pillars; spiritual, cultural, social, professional, emotional, mental, environmental and physical. In addition, each circle represents a particular area for each well-being pillar, such as resources, strengths, challenges and a plan of action. Students who are completing this model must carefully read each well-being resource and develop a basic understanding. There are no wrong answers, as each student labels each portion of the model with their own interpretations. The main objectives of the personal well-being model are to encourage students to think critically about well-being factors that can help them succeed in higher education.



*Figure Three: Secatero (2010), Action planning of Well Being Model, Resources, Strengths, Challenges, and Plan of Action.*

### RESOURCES

Resources are instrumental to student success at all levels of higher education. A resource can be identified as a mentor, student support specialist, elder, community activist, leader, coach or even a

family member. In addition, college campuses have various forms of resource centers that assist students with tutoring, school organizations, workshops and other events that are relevant to academic and personal growth.

## **STRENGTHS**

It is very important for college students to identify personal strengths that can assist in positive self-concept. Strengths are connected to the positive attributes that each person embodies; talents, thinking skills, friendliness, perseverance, dedication, knowledge of culture and other positive factors.

## **CHALLENGES**

Learning to identify challenges is another essential tool for developing a personal well-being model. Challenges are obstacles to succeeding in college, such as lack of mentors, homesickness, no sense of belonging, family issues and a shortage of financial aid funding.

## **PLAN OF ACTION**

The plan of action is a vital element of the well-being model, which identifies a possible solution in reference to addressing challenges. In this plan of action, a student may also list a timeframe to effectively solve the challenge. When using this model, it is important to know that some students may leave blanks in portions, which can be addressed at a later time.

## **DIAGRAM OF WELL-BEING MODEL IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

If you look carefully at the diagram, the student is in the center where all lines meet. In the inner circle, a student must identify a person that would serve as a resource in that particular well-being pillar. For example, in the spiritual portion of the well-being model, a student may identify a traditional elder as a resource and list daily prayer as a strength. As an example of a spiritual well-being challenge, a student may identify a disconnection with home. In the outer portion of the circle, a student will therefore identify a plan of action, such as calling home to speak with family members at least once per week as a possible solution.

### *Spiritual Well-being*

*Resource: Traditional Elder*

*Strengths: Daily prayer; Ceremonial duties.*

*Challenges: Homesickness; Wanting to come home often*

*Plan of Action: Call home once a week to speak with family members*

In another example, a student may identify and connect with physical well-being. As a resource, a student may identify their younger siblings as a resource, since most young children are physically active and idolize college students. As a challenge, a student may express that he or she is eating too much junk food rather than making healthy food choices. As a solution, the student will identify eating healthier foods, such as vegetables and fruits as a plan of action.

### *Physical Well-being*

*Resource: Young Children*

*Strength: Role model status for children*

***Challenges: Eating too much junk food***

***Plan of Action: Eat healthier foods such as vegetables and fruits***

## **DISCUSSION**

The model serves as a foundation for college students to recognize their strengths, challenges, and to initiate a plan of action. As part of learning from elders, the well being model can also be constructed as a problem solving tool. In the outer portion of the circle, a student is addressed with a particular problem which would be listed in the Plan of Action section. In the second step of the problem solving process, a student then identifies obstacles that relate to the problem. In step three, the student also identifies their own inner strengths and previous problem solving actions. As the student continues to solve their problem, they continue to work their way into the center of the circle which is labeled as a resource. In this fourth critical step, the student will consult either an elder, a student advisor or professor to help with the problem. Once the consultation process is finished, the student begins to work outward and combine their inner strengths, and words of wisdom from their resource as the fifth step. As the student continues to work their way outward, the student addresses the problem in the challenges section which is the sixth step. In the final step, the student then conducts follow up and lists this plan in the action plan section.

## **CREATING A LIFE SYMBOL**

According to many elders in the Canoncito Band of Navajos and among many indigenous peoples, symbolism is an intricate and important stage that can strengthen the well-being pillars which include purpose, identity, mind, heart, body, place, network, and goals. It is important that American Indian students identify these important concepts of well-being to promote balance in life.

As American Indian people, well-being can often take a symbol in many forms, including animate and inanimate. For example, as a Canoncito Navajo college student, corn was always revered as being a sacred symbol among our people. Therefore, I incorporated the eight pillars into a well-being symbol, illustrated as follows:

*As part of my personal life model, I drew the straight, intersecting lines as corn stalks, because it is sacred among the Canoncito Band of Navajos. A seed of corn resembles my umbilical cord, which my parents buried in the earth near my home. The umbilical cord represents my physical well-being and my foundation in life. As part of environmental well-being, I was nourished with love, respect and a good home. Corn also needs nourishment and proper care to grow strong and healthy. I developed my mental and emotional well-being as a teenager. I often credit one teacher who made a positive difference in my mental well-being by challenging me to reach my full potential in her classes. In terms of emotional well-being, my high school counselor was an extraordinary person, who helped me address challenges as I entered college. In this stage of a corn stalk, I developed a strong base to stand on my own. I continued to grow socially and professionally in my young college life. I became president of an American Indian club at my university to enhance my social network. I also developed my teaching skills as an educator and finished my teaching licensure program. These skills contributed to my professional well-being.*

*In the final stage, I developed my cultural and spiritual well-being. As part of my cultural well-being I learned about our tribal history and learned how to pray in the Native way. In this stage, a corn tassel marks its life stage of maturity. The tassel of the corn is a primary source of corn pollen that is used for prayer. During each morning, Navajo people pray with corn pollen, which is a strong symbol of walking the beauty way in life. – Shawn Secatero, Ph.D.*

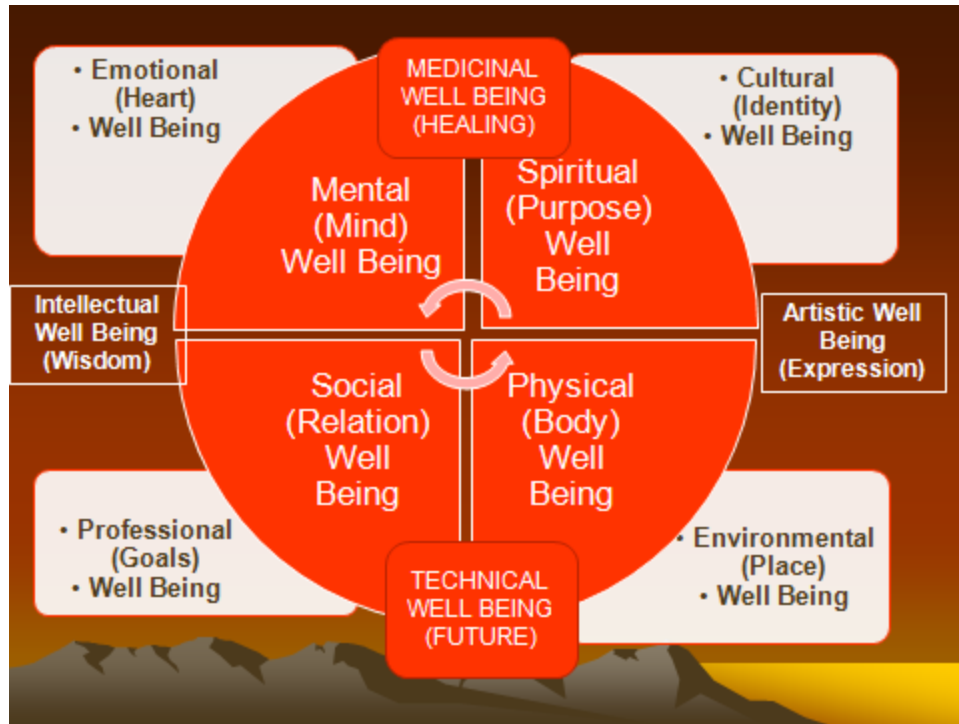


## FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

The Indigenous well-being model is currently in the developmental stages as more research needs to be conducted and implemented among various different populations. The well-being model can also be utilized among all people and by college practitioners to assist students who are experiencing challenges in their academic and personal lives. As the well-being model continues to evolve, four new pillars are under consideration for research which include financial, technical, practical, and artistic pillars. As American Indian people, our very existence in academia is often a sensitive issue and critical issue that needs further exploration. The well-being model exemplifies a wholistic approach in helping our students achieve success. In an oral history interview that I conducted in 1995, I asked a 100-year-old Canoncito Band of Navajo woman about what our children need to learn. She replied, “My children, always remember who you are, where you are from, and where you are going in life. You all have strong young wings, and I am sure you are eager to fly higher.”

### STAGE THREE OF WELL BEING:

As a post doctoral study, stage three of the Indigenous Well Being model adds four additional pillars to the eight pillars which include medicinal well-being, intellectual, artistic, and technical well being.



Source: Secatero (2010) National Indian Education Association Conference Presentation. San Diego, CA.

### **INTELLECTUAL WELL BEING (Wisdom)**

*Do I know life skills to navigate in both the modern and traditional worlds?*

Learning how to survive in life requires a great deal of wisdom that is learned through life stages as well as practical skills and knowledge. As part of intellectual well-being, an individual must learn how to balance both the modern and traditional teachings. Examples of intellectual well-being include cooking, providing shelter, learning how to drive, and reading a map. Intellectual well-being is strongly connected to mental and emotional well-being pillars since it involves deep thinking and utilizing instinct as a thinking mode.

### **TECHNICAL WELL BEING (Future)**

*Am I prepared to navigate technology as part of my future?*

Due to the demands and changes in our world, it is often essential to develop advanced thinking concepts that involve the use of technology. Technical well-being is often essential in navigating computer information systems, high tech communicative gadgets, using automatic teller machines, blackberry phones, digital notepads, cable programming, etc. become a necessity to operate modern technology. In addition, technical well-being also includes financial literacy which provides stability in an individual's life.

### **ARTISTIC WELL BEING (Expression)**

*How do I express myself as a unique individual?*

Expression is vital for any individual which involves voice. Artistic Well Being is a connection of physical and social well-being. Several basic examples of artistic well-being include: arts, talent, crafts, music, storytelling, particular hobbies, and oratory skills. In many indigenous cultures, it is very important for the younger generations to learn artistic well-being to honor these traditions and to continually express their culture and identity. Examples include pottery making, rug weaving, games, etc.

### **MEDICINAL WELL BEING (Healing)**

*Do I know how to heal myself, and honor my destiny in life?*

Medicinal well-being is a new term that involves the healing cycle in life. Healing is very important and essential especially in learning from mistakes, negative experiences, forgiveness, and it can be a form of celebration in life. Healing ourselves is a part of life that we must continue to acknowledge and to recognize our achievements. Medicinal well-being is the closing pillar in the well-being model as it is strongly correlated with spiritual, and mental well-being pillars.

### **CONCLUSION**

It is very imperative that we continually honor ourselves, our people, and all living things in life. We must envision well-being in our future. Although these 12 pillars of well-being plant the seeds of our wellness in life, we must acknowledge our resources, strengths, challenges and a plan of action to embody harmony and happiness in life.

### **Resources:**

Washington State Well-being Site (retrieved 11/9/09). WSU Wellbeing, PO Box 641830, Washington State University, Pullman WA. [wellbeing@wsu.edu](mailto:wellbeing@wsu.edu)

Miller, Ron (1999) Holistic Education Review. Pp.

Platero, Jessie (1995) Oral History Project of the Canoncito Band of Navajo. Tohajiilee, N.M.

Secatero, Shawn (2006) Traditional Leadership Perspectives of the Canoncito Band of Navajo, Educational Specialist Degree Capstone Project. Interviews from Canoncito Band of Navajo 12 Member Traditional Council. Tohajiilee, N.M.