OUT OF THE BOX:

THE WIDE WORLD OF WELL-BEING

Via the Well-Being course taught by Jason Ware through the Honors College, students like Luke Francisco had an opportunity to explore how different populations define well-being.

On the campus of Purdue University, one will find an orderly array of red brick buildings intertwined with concrete walkways and well-maintained gardens. Students willing to venture off campus to the east, though, might find their way to nearby neighborhoods composed of a variety of artfully designed homes. Some may venture further to Happy Hollow, a local park with a playground and hiking trails boasting vibrant colors in the fall. The opportunities are plentiful given the size of the city.

But as students approach the Wabash River, they encounter a natural boundary to their adventures that separates Purdue University from the neighboring city of Lafayette, both physically and culturally. Those who cross this boundary may notice a landscape with different architecture and demographics. They may see a traditional town square surrounding a courthouse downtown or notice the abundance of factories lining the edge of town. These are some of the discrepancies between life in Lafayette and West Lafayette, and they help define well-being for citizens of these two cities.

As a part of the Well-Being course taught by Jason Ware through the Honors College, my class investigated what factors affect well-being in Lafayette's East Washington (a pseudonym) neighborhood and considered how well-being could be improved there. First, we set out to define what determines a person's well-being, and it was helpful to look at this through the lens of our lives in West Lafayette. Then, we needed to connect with local organizations in Lafayette to gain insight into how others, particularly urban poor populations, define well-being. We conducted participatory action research during this stage of our process, which is a form of research based on inter-

acting with subjects and encouraging them to take action on an issue throughout the research process. In this case, we hoped to motivate our subjects to become involved in improving their own well-being and that of those around them. Because the class was service-learning based, our "subjects" were the local neighborhood residents we met, but they were not research subjects in the traditional sense because we were working alongside them and trying to help them as we were recording observations. We also wanted to help our community partner both during our research and through our final task, which involved reporting back to our community partner with suggestions on how to more effectively improve well-being.

DEFINING WELL-BEING

Well-being is a term that is frequently used in relation to personal health, but health is only one contributor to one's well-being. Each year, *Monocle*, a magazine highlighting global affairs with an urban focus, releases its ranking of the most livable cities in the world. The magazine uses an extensive list of characteristics to produce these rankings, so we began by looking at how some of them might influence our work (Gibson, 2017). However, *Monocle*'s target audience is middle- to upper-class, highly educated adults, and the variables it chooses reflect this audience. Therefore, we turned to a document produced by the City of Lafayette (2017) describing its master urban plan, which gave us insight into how Lafayette defines well-being for its residents and what the city is trying to improve. Although this

(Banner) Each of the three groups and representatives from their community partners after providing feedback to them.

research gave us a solid understanding of environmental factors that can influence well-being, there are many other factors to consider.

We shifted our focus to Ruut Veenhoven, an internationally renowned scholar on happiness, to discover some of these other factors. Veenhoven (2000) defines quality of life (another term for well-being in our research) more universally by dividing it into four main categories that can be expressed in terms of the difference in one's chances and outcomes and the distinction between one's internal and external qualities. For instance, the term "liveability of the environment" refers to the combination of one's life chances and external qualities, which is similar to *Monocle's* focus on how one's surroundings determine well-being. Another category is a blend of one's life chances and inner qualities known as "life-ability of the person," and well-being in terms of physical health would fall under this category. "Utility of life," which is measured by one's life results and outer qualities, describes well-being derived from providing value to something or someone besides oneself. Lastly, "appreciation of life" combines one's life results and inner qualities, and Veenhoven explains that this category of well-being encompasses traditional definitions of happiness. Veenhoven's framework for well-being served as an important guide throughout the semester when we were trying to assess well-being in communities through our observations.

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH WITH A COMMUNITY PARTNER

Our next step was finding a community partner that would be able to connect us with urban poor populations. My group chose to work with the Moore Center (a pseudonym), a neighborhood center created by a community development corporation in Lafayette's East Washington neighborhood. The center opened about two years ago with the goal of serving the residents in its near proximity and, as expected, has been slow in building trust with the community. Thomas and Chris (both pseudonyms), the leaders of the Moore Center, explained to us that many of the children in the neighborhood live with single mothers and several siblings or cousins. They tend to congregate at the center after school because their parents are still working and the center offers homework help and other after-school programming. Despite its success with children, the center has struggled to attract other age groups even through hosting neighborhood meetings and special events. Thomas informed us that about 60% of the nearby house-

Purdue students with some of the youth from the neighborhood after an event at the center.

holds have single mothers and many of them work multiple jobs, so this could explain the lack of adult involvement. Also, people tend to move in and out of the neighborhood frequently, so many residents might not feel a need to connect with a community they will soon leave. Regardless, the Moore Center's leaders hoped that our involvement over the semester could bolster teenage and adult participation.

Our first encounter with neighborhood residents occurred at a monthly neighborhood meeting. I quickly noticed the diversity of the nine attendees—there were two single mothers, two Purdue graduate students, two older residents, a couple that lived outside the neighborhood, and a man who had moved to the area within the past month; four of the attendees were African American and the others were White. I felt this unity across racial and generational gaps was an important first step toward improving well-being in the neighborhood. This meeting was more heavily attended than others because Brian (a pseudonym), a member of the Lafayette urban planning committee, was in attendance to address residents. He discussed issues such as sidewalk repairs and street lighting, and when he explained that residents would need to investigate each street in the neighborhood and record areas of concern on a map, everyone volunteered. Given the center's historical struggles with attracting adults, I was surprised by how eager many of these people were to participate. Conversation quickly shifted toward weightier subjects, though, as attendees wanted to discuss ways to battle crime while they had the ear of a city official. Brian tried his best to brainstorm solutions to these problems, but he had trouble helping the residents since he had never worked with law enforcement. Many of the residents expressed concern over how drug use in the neighborhood could affect local children, which did not surprise me given recent news about heroin

epidemics across Indiana (Paul, 2017). However, I was shocked to hear the residents discuss the prevalence of crime. One elderly woman calmly explained how her house had been broken into the previous night, and she acted like it was commonplace for such a thing to occur in the neighborhood. Some of the other residents had stronger reactions, but no one was particularly surprised. Having previously spent time in the neighborhood at night without ever feeling afraid, I was startled that there was such a problem with theft. This first meeting helped my classmates and I visualize what life might look like in the East Washington neighborhood and what people living there value as a part of their well-being.

Later in the semester we attended another meeting, which was organized in a similar manner as the first. Once again the residents were eager to volunteer, this time to set up Christmas decorations and distribute a neighborhood newsletter, and one active resident in the neighborhood named Michael (a pseudonym) even brought a slow cooker filled to the brim with pulled pork for dinner. Yet it was the discussion of a traffic study that stood out to me the most from this meeting. Michael had long been complaining about the number of automobile accidents that were occurring because drivers would speed through the neighborhood and total their cars as they tried to round the sharp corner outside his home. The city never performed a traffic study because they first conducted a preliminary study that concluded there was not enough traffic in the area to warrant a traffic study. However, the issue had arisen again in recent months as more kids were attending the Moore Center and crossing the streets nearby while the speeding problem persisted. I think the residents were frustrated that the city had devoted resources to determining whether a traffic study should be performed rather than performing a traffic study in the first place, so Brian recommended that the residents email the city engineer. He had drafted a sample email he thought they could edit individually by adding some instances of accidents they had witnessed. I was impressed by how much effort Brian devoted to advocating for the residents, and I left the meeting feeling optimistic that a traffic study would ultimately be performed. Overall, I think the residents felt slighted that the city had not addressed their concerns, but they were very appreciative of Brian, so this sense of having their voices heard seemed to be a driving factor of well-being for the residents.

In addition to attending neighborhood meetings, my group decided to organize a major event at the Moore Center. We planned a pumpkin carving session for a Friday night before Halloween because we

A replica of the flier students distributed through the neighborhood to advertise the pumpkin carving event.

anticipated it would be a great opportunity for students of all ages to engage in an activity they might otherwise not. We also thought pumpkin carving would encourage parents to attend because it is difficult for children to carve their own pumpkins and we were not going to let them use knives without adult supervision. To prepare for the event, we printed fliers and walked door to door distributing them around the neighborhood. Many residents we met at their homes were very hesitant to talk with us, and I was not surprised because as college students, it was relatively obvious that we were outsiders in the neighborhood. When we indicated we were working with the Moore Center, some were more open to talking with us while others remained tentative. A few indicated that they would plan on attending, and in general we received much more positive feedback than I had expected. In a previous semester when I worked with the center, some residents were not even aware it existed despite living only a couple blocks away, so the center has been making noticeable progress toward integrating itself into the community.

While handing out fliers, we discovered that the pumpkin carving event would be held during Fall Break for the local schools, which tempered our

Members of the class work with children at the pumpkin carving event.

expectations of a large turnout. However, several kids showed up for the event and seemed to really enjoy it. Although the adult turnout was slim to none, we helped the children with their pumpkins while Chris went around the neighborhood to gather adults. By the end of the event, we had about 25–30 kids and 7–10 adults filling the room. A Hispanic mother and her two children attended as well, which was a first according to Thomas and Chris. Even though Chris had to gather many of the adults, we were satisfied knowing our event had generated adult interest. One of our main goals during the event was to talk with these adults about well-being and identify some who might be willing to participate in interviews, but the adults mostly mingled among themselves after they arrived and we had become preoccupied with helping the kids. Thus, we never set up any interviews, but Thomas and Chris lauded our event and claimed it was by far the most adult participation they had seen in their time at the center. Afterwards, we voted on the best pumpkins, and Thomas served hot apple cider. We were surprised by the eagerness the children displayed in cleaning up the room when we were finished. In terms of our goals with well-being research, we accomplished very little through the pumpkin carving event, but it was easy to see how much the Moore Center grew its relationship with the community through our event. Since this improvement is one goal of participatory action research, I would still consider the event a success.

Although we failed to set up any interviews during the pumpkin carving event, we still managed to find one willing interviewee. Karen (a pseudonym) is a retired truck driver who spent part of her childhood in Lafayette before living in several different places and ultimately moving back to the city. She has been very involved with the Moore Center during her time in the neighborhood, from attending neighborhood meetings to teaching sewing classes and organizing bingo games. We discovered that she spends much of her time trying to serve others and deeply values her

I scoop out pumpkin guts with two young girls at the pumpkin carving event.

Christian faith. Chris and Thomas recommended that we interview her and arranged a time to do so. We modeled our questions on the five characteristics of well-being put forth by the Gallup Well-Being Index (Gallup-Sharecare, 2015)—purpose, social, financial, physical, and community—and we gave special attention to community well-being since it was most relevant to the Moore Center’s operations.

Karen did a fantastic job providing a firsthand view into life in the neighborhood. We were aware of the crime problem, but her comments about her car being regularly broken into and her apartment being robbed solidified this idea. She also added to the narrative of the drug problem in the neighborhood, explaining that there had been lots of drug activity in the past before it diminished after the Moore Center’s creation. Many of her concerns had to do with children, though, and how they might be affected by crime and drug use. She echoed Michael’s worries about speeding and how it could harm the children and expressed unease over kidnapping associated with human trafficking, which has become prevalent in Lafayette (Paul, 2016). When she lived in Lafayette, there was a curfew for children, and she suggested instituting one now to ensure their safety. In addition, she identified bus stops as potential safety hazards for children, so she watches the kids each day as they wait for the bus outside her apartment. It seemed Karen derived much of her well-being from that of the children around her. As for community well-being, Karen told us that she would describe most of her neighbors as “acquaintances” rather than friends and said she would be hesitant to trust most of them to watch her house if she were planning on leaving. This paints a bleak picture of community well-being in the East Washington neighborhood, and Karen’s failed attempts to convince others to attend the neighborhood meetings do not improve

this assessment. However, she talked about receiving emotional support at the Moore Center, and if others are using the center for this purpose, it could begin establishing relationships with locals and improving community well-being. Karen also discussed improving infrastructure, particularly repaving and sweeping the streets, as a means of improving the neighborhood, but she seemed doubtful that this would ever happen. Karen is only one person from the neighborhood, so we cannot assume that her views represent those of the other residents, but this interview in conjunction with the neighborhood meetings suggested that there are many potential areas in which well-being could be improved.

FORMULATING RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

As we prepared to present our findings to Thomas and Chris, we wanted to focus on what specifically the Moore Center could do to improve well-being. We decided that the center was on track to fulfill its role based on the large number of children it had attracted and its success, albeit slowly, in building relationships with adults. I believe Thomas and Chris are assets to the community because of their dedication to building relationships. Similarly, I feel people like Karen and Michael are valuable because they are willing to contribute their time to develop a better sense of community well-being. Although it would be ideal to get everyone involved in the community, the center cannot expect single mothers who are working multiple jobs to find time for neighborhood meetings. Therefore, if it can motivate people like Karen, who is retired, and Michael, who lives alone, to become leaders in the community and find others like them to join forces with the center, it could see a major uptick in adult participation. These adults could help organize events, work with the children, and initiate petitions. Since many of the residents define well-being in terms of safety, as evidenced by the concern over the traffic study, drug use, and break ins, I believe a petition for increased patrols of the neighborhood by law enforcement officials could be very beneficial and would be a relatively simple fix, especially to the speeding problem. In terms of Veenhoven's description of well-being, these initiatives could improve the "liveability of the environment." In addition, those such as Karen and Michael who are involved with these initiatives could develop a sense of "utility of life." Children benefitting from extra attention at the Moore Center could feel more valued and see an increase in their "appreciation of life." During our interaction with residents, we noticed that many of them derive well-being from that of the local children, so investing in children could result in the increased well-being of other

community members as well. Therefore, I believe the center can maximize its efforts to increase well-being in the neighborhood by identifying a core group of adults who would be willing to give their time to community initiatives.

Looking back on our work with the Moore Center, we felt that we effectively aided the organization with its goal of generating adult participation through our pumpkin carving event, and I think the center will continue having success connecting with more adults. Gaining trust from community members was key to advancing our research, and our group built positive relationships with locals, so hopefully a future group will be able to capitalize on these relationships. We built enough rapport to conduct one interview, so we would encourage groups in future semesters to pursue additional interview opportunities and add to the story of how local residents define well-being. Michael would definitely be an interview candidate along with the two mothers who attended the neighborhood meeting. We observed growth within the community even during one semester working at the center, so hopefully a future group will encounter more unity among residents and perhaps analyze what, if anything, has changed to create additional unity.

As for myself, I enjoyed working with the Moore Center and meeting people in the neighborhood. Many of them shared unique stories, and I saw how their experiences influenced the factors that most contribute to their well-being. As a college student, education has been one constant in my life, so my well-being has often been determined by my grades and the amount of free time in my schedule, and I have observed similar tendencies in my peers. However, well-being is much more complex than a couple factors, and the term has different meanings for different people. For most people we encountered in the East Washington neighborhood, the condition of their surroundings, particularly in terms of safety, was the main determinant of their well-being, which focuses on what Veenhoven describes as "liveability of the environment." This makes sense because this is probably the area of well-being that could be most improved in the neighborhood. As I worked at the Moore Center, it was sometimes difficult to connect my volunteering with improving well-being, but I realized that if my group could help the center develop relationships with local citizens, these two parties could work together to solve problems such as safety and drug use in the neighborhood, improving the "liveability of the environment." This could allow both residents and the center to turn their focus to community well-being, which until this point

has been largely absent. When examined through the lens of this bigger intention, I believe my group made meaningful progress that will hopefully serve as a foundation for future work at the Moore Center.

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