

# Michael Martino



# Wellness

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## Introduction: The Current State of Wellness Initiatives

Current efforts to improve wellness and reduce burnout are commendable and represent a step in the right direction. However, many of these wellness programs fall short, often shifting the burden onto individuals rather than addressing the systemic issues that contribute to burnout. These initiatives, though well-intentioned, can sometimes feel more like victim-blaming than genuine support. They tend to focus on lifestyle changes—like encouraging more exercise, sleep, and healthy eating—without acknowledging the broader context that makes it difficult for individuals to consistently engage in these behaviors.

But wellness isn't just about managing stress through lifestyle choices. It's about cultivating a life that is fulfilling and balanced across multiple dimensions. To truly support well-being, we need to move beyond superficial fixes and ask ourselves a deeper question: What constitutes a well-lived life? While the specifics may vary for each person, history and philosophy offer frameworks that have stood the test of time, providing us with a more comprehensive understanding of what it means to live well.

## Rethinking Our Approach

### Defining a Well-Lived Life

To truly support wellness, we must first understand what it means to live well. This concept, while deeply personal, has been explored and defined by thinkers across history. A well-lived life isn't just about managing stress or maintaining physical health—it's about finding balance and fulfillment in all aspects of life. Two frameworks that resonate particularly well in this context are those proposed by Cal Newport and Carl Jung.

#### Cal Newport's Framework:

**Craft:** Engaging in meaningful work that challenges and fulfills you.

**Community:** Building and maintaining strong social connections.

**Constitution:** Prioritizing physical and mental health.

**Celebrate:** Taking time to enjoy and appreciate life's moments.

**Contemplation:** Reflecting on your experiences and aligning your actions with your values.

## Jung's Framework:

**Good physical and mental health:** Maintaining overall well-being through a healthy body and mind.

**Good personal and intimate relationships:** Nurturing relationships with family, friends, and partners.

**Seeing beauty in art and nature:** Cultivating an appreciation and deep, emotional connection that enhances well-being and influences our psychological state.

**A reasonable standard of living and satisfactory work:** Ensuring that your work provides not only financial stability but also personal satisfaction.

**A philosophical or religious outlook that fosters resilience:** Adopting a worldview that helps you navigate life's challenges with grace and strength.

These pillars offer a comprehensive vision of what it means to live well. By recognizing these elements as essential, institutions can begin to create environments that genuinely support their members' well-being, rather than merely offering surface-level solutions. The above frameworks are only two examples, many others exist - the main point is to acknowledge the many different, at times competing, dimensions of holistic wellbeing.

## Moving Beyond Information: Understanding Human Behavior

However, defining these pillars and simply providing information isn't enough. Human behavior is complex, and it's shaped by a myriad of factors beyond the individual's control, including social, cultural, and environmental influences. It's not sufficient to tell people to exercise more or manage their time better. We must acknowledge that these behaviors are often the result of larger systemic issues that can't be addressed through individual effort alone.

We must resist the reflex to blame individuals for their inability to engage in certain lifestyle behaviors or suppress undesirable ones. Instead, we should ask how we can build an environment, society, and culture that genuinely values life outside of work. By addressing these broader systemic issues, we can create a supportive framework that empowers individuals to live well, rather than leaving them to struggle alone against the tide of overwhelming demands.

## Institutional Commitments to Personal Wellness

To create a culture that genuinely supports well-being, institutions must make a clear commitment to personal wellness. This includes defining and promoting values that contribute to a well-lived life, providing practical resources, and setting clear expectations. However, it's also crucial to recognize that wellness is a shared responsibility. While institutions play a vital role in

creating supportive environments, individuals must also engage actively with the resources and opportunities provided.

## 1. Defining Values

### Institutional Responsibilities:

- **Provide a Framework:** Institutions should offer a well-defined set of values that support a well-lived life. This could be drawn from established frameworks like those of Cal Newport and Carl Jung, which help guide individuals in aligning their personal goals with broader well-being.
- **Dedicated Staff:** Institutions should have dedicated staff or counselors to work with students and faculty on developing their personal values and wellness plans. This could include workshops, one-on-one sessions, and regular check-ins to ensure these values are being integrated into daily life.

### Individual Responsibilities:

- **Personal Reflection:** Individuals are responsible for engaging with these frameworks and reflecting on their own values. This involves considering how these values align with their personal and professional goals and taking active steps to incorporate them into their lives.
- **Active Participation:** Attending workshops or sessions provided by the institution to help refine their understanding of what a well-lived life means for them.

## 2. Curating Resources

### Institutional Responsibilities:

- **Crowdsourced Resource Lists:** Institutions should curate comprehensive lists of resources, crowd-sourced from current university employees, faculty, and students. These resources should cover everything from childcare providers to local spiritual organizations, offering contacts and options for individuals to explore as they see fit.
- **Accessibility:** Ensure these resources are easily accessible, regularly updated, and inclusive of diverse needs and backgrounds.

### Individual Responsibilities:

- **Utilizing Resources:** Individuals are responsible for making use of the resources available to them. Whether it's finding a childcare provider or exploring local community groups, it's important to take the initiative to utilize the support structures in place.
- **Providing Feedback:** Engage with the institution by providing feedback on the usefulness of these resources and suggesting additions or improvements where needed.

## 3. Clear Expectations and Organizational Tools

### **Institutional Responsibilities:**

- **Setting Clear Expectations:** Institutions should provide clear guidelines and expectations for trainees, especially during the different phases of their education. This includes outlining what is expected during each year of a PhD program and offering insights into how roles and responsibilities change over time.
- **Offering Organizational Tools:** Provide students and faculty with access to tools and resources that help them manage their time effectively, such as project management software, time-blocking strategies, or seminars on organizational skills.

### **Individual Responsibilities:**

- **Adhering to Expectations:** Individuals should take the time to understand these expectations and align their efforts accordingly. Knowing what is expected at different stages can reduce stress and provide a clearer path forward.
- **Developing Personal Systems:** Beyond the tools provided by the institution, individuals should develop personal systems that work best for them. This might involve adopting certain organizational methods, experimenting with different productivity tools, or refining their approach to time management.

## **4. Fostering Community**

### **Institutional Responsibilities:**

- **Creating Opportunities for Connection:** Institutions must create ample opportunities for community building within the academic environment. This includes organizing events, fostering inclusive spaces, and encouraging participation in activities that promote social connection.
- **Involving Families:** Recognize the importance of work-life integration by including significant others and children in community events, making it easier for individuals to balance personal and professional life.

### **Individual Responsibilities:**

- **Engaging with the Community:** Individuals should take advantage of these opportunities to connect with others, both within and outside their immediate academic circles. Building meaningful relationships can provide essential support during stressful times.
- **Balancing Participation:** While it's important to engage with the community, individuals must also find a balance that allows them to maintain their other commitments and personal wellness.

By acknowledging the dual responsibilities of institutions and individuals in fostering wellness, we can create a more holistic and sustainable approach to well-being. Institutions can and should provide the structure, resources, and support necessary for a well-lived life, but

individuals must also take active steps to engage with and utilize these offerings. Together, we can build a culture that truly values wellness, not just as a concept, but as a lived reality.

## A Call to Action

As we move forward, it's essential that both institutions and individuals commit to fostering an environment where wellness is not just an afterthought but a central part of the academic experience. We've outlined a vision for how we can achieve this—a vision that requires a shift in how we think about and approach well-being.

**For Institutions:** The responsibility doesn't end with providing information or holding the occasional wellness seminar. True commitment means embedding the principles of a well-lived life into the very fabric of the academic environment. This involves creating systems that support personal wellness, offering clear guidance and resources, and fostering a community that values the individual beyond their academic output.

**For Individuals:** While institutions must lead the way, each of us also has a role to play. Engage with the resources provided, reflect on your values, and take proactive steps to integrate wellness into your daily life. Remember, wellness is not a passive state—it's an active pursuit that requires both effort and intention.

Together, we can create a culture where wellness is not just a buzzword, but a lived experience for everyone in the academic community. Let's start by taking these ideas seriously, putting them into action, and working collaboratively to build an environment where everyone has the opportunity to live well.

## Feedback

- Matthew Greseth agrees that the topic of wellness is a great one for a blog series.
- Greseth provides two options for the structure of the series:
  - Option 1: Two-part series
    - Part 1: Defining wellness holistically
    - Part 2: Prescriptive advice for maintaining wellness
  - Option 2: Three-part series
    - Part 1: Holistic wellness
    - Part 2: Institutional responsibilities
    - Part 3: Individual responsibilities
- Greseth emphasizes the importance of having a consistent theme throughout the series, whether through an anecdote or character.
- He favors a narrative approach rather than a listicle format.
- Greseth invites Michael to discuss any ideas further.

## Three-part series

### Narrative Framework

**Main Character:** A student from a non-traditional or underrepresented background (based loosely on you). The character's worldview is shaped by their previous life experiences, which equipped them with skills and perspectives that don't always align with the expectations or culture of academia.

### Part 1: Defining Wellness Through a Personal Lens

- **Opening:** The character arrives in academia with high hopes but quickly feels disoriented by the unfamiliar culture. They struggle with a sense of isolation because the institution doesn't recognize or accommodate their unique background.
  - Unintentionally - they say things that don't always seem to align with their actions, and I constantly feel like I'm inadequate as is and am trying to be "good" to fit in with expectations
- **Key Theme:** Wellness is defined differently for individuals based on their life experiences. For someone who grew up in a community-oriented environment, wellness might include social connection and practical support, not just personal achievement.
  - And demonstrate how because of life circumstances I had to bust my ass in a way that neglected all other aspects of my life, which was hard to adjust or even recognize upon entering grad school. People are so guarded about their vulnerabilities/failings that it made having any kind of candid, substantive discussions challenging.
- **Narrative Link:** Use the character's early academic experience to introduce Cal Newport's and Carl Jung's frameworks. Show how their definition of a well-lived life evolves as they begin to reflect on these models.

## Part 2: Institutional Responsibilities

- **Plot:** The character navigates institutional challenges—perhaps the lack of mentorship, unclear expectations, or policies that assume a one-size-fits-all approach to student success. They feel like they are being asked to 'adapt' to academia without the institution meeting them halfway.
- **Key Theme:** Institutions need to acknowledge that wellness cannot be a one-size-fits-all model. Highlight how academic structures often ignore the cultural, economic, and psychological contexts of students from diverse backgrounds.
- **Narrative Link:** Show the character discovering that many of their challenges are systemic. This realization highlights the responsibility of the institution to provide not only general wellness resources but tailored support that takes diverse student backgrounds into account.

## Part 3: Personal Responsibilities and Adaptation

- **Plot:** As the character develops greater self-awareness, they begin to take ownership of their wellness, but only after acknowledging their unique strengths and challenges. They learn to navigate the tension between personal responsibility and systemic limitations.
- **Key Theme:** While institutions must offer support, individuals still play a role in maintaining their own wellness. The character develops personal strategies that allow them to succeed, not by conforming to the existing system, but by integrating their background into their academic life in meaningful ways.
- **Narrative Link:** End with the character achieving a more holistic sense of wellness—not by ignoring their past, but by embracing it and using it as a strength within the academic setting.

## Common Themes for All Parts

- **Adapting vs. Thriving:** The character's journey can reflect the tension between adapting to a system that wasn't designed for them and finding ways to thrive by creating new frameworks for success.
- **Visibility and Validation:** The character's internal narrative can address the struggle to be seen and validated within academia, especially when their worldview and lived experience aren't reflected in the institutional culture.
- **Holistic Wellness:** Show how true wellness in academia must incorporate recognition of diverse backgrounds and experiences, moving beyond mere individual effort to a collective responsibility.

## Next Steps

- **Reflection Pieces:** You could incorporate brief reflection points at the end of each part, asking the reader to consider their own experiences, particularly how their background affects their approach to wellness.



- **Call to Action:** At the end of the series, a strong call to action that encourages both institutions and individuals to rethink wellness from a more inclusive perspective could tie it all together.