

# **Harmonizing Perspectives: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Developing a Multidimensional Theoretical Framework of Self-Care for Student Success**

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*With an increasing emphasis on holistic student success, higher education institutions prioritize innovative strategies promoting wellness and belonging, recognizing self-care as crucial. An interdisciplinary faculty team from Kennesaw State University's Wellstar College of Health and Human Services explored self-care literature (2013-2023) to develop a conceptual framework for self-care from a multidisciplinary perspective. Inspired by robust literature and the College's Innovative Ecosystem for Student Success model, the team identified eight dimensions of self-care, including internal (psychological, spiritual, intellectual, physical) and external (occupational, sociocultural, financial, environmental) elements. This framework highlights self-care as fundamental to wellness and student success, encouraging future work to delineate strategies supporting these practices.*

*Keywords: self-care, wellness, health and human services, holistic framework, student success, higher education*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Academic leaders within higher education are increasingly focused on student success as an essential priority. This focus is in response to trends, such as increased student enrollment, academic institution mandates, and calls for improvement in operational efficiency, effective spending, and accountability (Wade-Berg et al., 2023). Within the abundant student success literature, researchers described and measured it [student success] and presented varied criteria to illuminate and measure this concept (Cui et al., 2019; Khan et al., 2019; Lane et al., 2019; McCallen & Johnson, 2019; Sneyers & DeWitte, 2019). However, no universally agreed-upon definition of student success exists, nor is there a best approach to achieving it.

Traditionally, higher education institutions viewed student success from a deficit perspective and primarily focused on barriers students experience that negatively impact their success. Faculty, staff, and students often accepted retention, progression, and graduation (RPG) rates as the pinnacle of success. More recently, however, in response to a call to define student success more holistically, academic leaders and researchers began to broaden the lens through which they view it and shift their focus toward variables that positively influence students to excel and thrive (Bentrim & Henning, 2023; Cox, 2018; Wade-Berg et al., 2023). Moving beyond standard metrics of success, college students thrive “when [they] experience the maximum benefits from his or her specific ecosystem and demonstrate this through heightened social and academic engagement for a deeper sense of [personal] happiness” (Cox, 2018, para 11). This student success perspective celebrates student support services while highlighting academic studies and adult development to exceed a singular focus on academic outcomes.

Kennesaw State University (KSU) Wellstar College of Health and Human Services (WCHHS) stands out as an academic institution that has redefined its perspective on student success. Wade-Berg et al. (2023) detail the College's innovative, comprehensive, systematic approach to understanding student success, its complex nature, and the numerous internal and external variables influencing its attainment. As part of this approach, the WCHHS has developed a unique holistic conceptual model - the Innovative Ecosystem for Student Success – where students are the focal point and live within an ecosystem (see Figure 1). This model measures student success by the environment and intersections among multiple variables, categorized into four life domains (see Figure 1). While all four domains support the College's student success goals and their overarching vision to improve health and well-being, the fourth domain is particularly relevant with its focus on wellness, readiness, and belonging. The wellness, readiness, and belonging constructs comprise numerous components that warrant further exploration. This paper will consider self-care as vital to wellness.

Recognizing the need to prioritize self-care in the wellness domain, an interdisciplinary team of dedicated faculty in the WCHHS came together. Their shared goal was to explore and identify an integrated approach to self-care and its relationship to student success. This paper includes an explanation of the ecosystem model, a detailed review of the literature on self-care and student success, a description of the

team's initial work, and the conceptual framework that emerged. Potential implications of the framework are considered.

### **Ecosystem**

The WCHHS's interdisciplinary team on self-care utilized the college's previously developed Innovative Ecosystem for Student Success model to guide their work. Wade-Berg et al. (2023) describe how the WCHHS utilized insights from the literature and previously collected student success data to develop an innovative holistic model. This model conceptualizes student success, examines its multifaceted nature more closely, and designs actionable interventions within the college to promote success (see Figure 1). The college integrated elements from two existing frameworks into its ecosystem model: the Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child (WSCC) model, which reflects the interrelatedness of health and education priorities (Lewallen et al., 2015), and the Student Success Ecosystem, which conceptualizes higher educational institutions as being a microcosm of the communities where people live and grow (Ortiz & Morales, 2019). The WCHHS's ecosystem model significantly contributes to student success and can potentially transform the collegiate experience for students.

The WCHHS's ecosystem illustrates a student-centered approach to success, positioning students at the core of the ecosystem where they interact with their environment and intersecting domains. This ecosystem consists of four life domains, each with a specific focus as follows: Domain 1 centers on academic advising, academic surveillance, and transfer processes; Domain 2 addresses career planning and graduation coaching services; Domain 3 concentrates on supplemental instruction, various learning supports, and mentorship from peers and alums; and Domain 4 prioritizes wellness, readiness, and a sense of belonging as crucial elements of student success. Each domain includes examples of scalable strategic initiatives and continuous improvement opportunities intentionally designed to promote student satisfaction and success within that domain. (Wade-Berg et al., 2023). Other published papers describe more details about the WCHHS' ecosystem model development (e.g., Ramos et al., 2024; Wade-Berg et al., 2023).

The WCHHS developed its ecosystem model with expectations to continuously evolve and influence research, application to practice, student success efforts, and collegiate experiences. Wade-Berg et al. (2023) recommended several strategies to further develop, evaluate, and apply this model, including forming interdisciplinary teams to foster a collaborative, integrated approach to student success. The college's initial step when deciding what interprofessional student success team to form was to select one life domain from their ecosystem model as a priority focus. After careful consideration and based on the team's collective expertise, Domain 4, emphasizing wellness, readiness, and belonging, was chosen as the focus of this paper. Self-care is recognized as an essential element of wellness.

As used in this paper, self-care refers to taking an intentional role in meeting one's holistic needs, particularly in high-stress professions like healthcare. It is an integral component of wellness and is especially needed among individuals pursuing careers and working in healthcare. Researchers demonstrated that inadequate self-care often adversely affects the health and wellness of professional workers in these fields (Taylor et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2022). Researchers suggest that work-related stress can result in burnout among health and human services professionals, such as social workers, nurses, and exercise science professionals (Taylor et al., 2019; Younas, 2017). Recognizing the importance of self-care and its specific relevance to the needs and success of their students, the WCHHS's interdisciplinary team, comprising faculty from various disciplines within the college, designated self-care as the vital component within Domain 4 of the ecosystem model on which to focus their work primarily. The broad scope of the team was to comprehensively explore the concept of self-care and its relationship to the student's success within the WCHHS.

**FIGURE 1**  
**WELLSTAR COLLEGE OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES STUDENT SUCCESS ECOSYSTEM**



**LITERATURE REVIEW**

The WCHHS interdisciplinary team began by exploring existing literature about self-care across each of the four broad disciplines within the College: Social Work and Human Services, Nursing, Exercise Science and Sport Management, and Health Promotion and Physical Education. Utilizing a multi-search approach, the team combined the term “self-care” with the name of each discipline to identify recent literature published between 2013 and 2023.

**Self-Care in Health and Human Services**

Chronic stress is a significant occupational hazard in health and human services fields, leading to adverse outcomes both organizationally (e.g., reduced student success, increased absenteeism, lower productivity) and individually [e.g., mental and physical health issues, impaired cognitive functioning] (Jennings, 2008; Myers, 2017; Pipe et al., 2009). Individuals in these fields are particularly susceptible to chronic stress and its effects, including compromised ability to provide quality care (Taylor et al., 2019; Younas, 2017).

Burnout, defined as “a psychological syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment” (Zalauquett & Wood, 1997, p. 192), is prevalent in health and human services. It is driven by the complexity of healthcare environments, rising acuity levels of care, and workforce shortages (Bae et al., 2019; Anthony & Vidal, 2010). The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated stress, burnout, and workforce challenges in these fields (Lewis et al., 2022; Snyder, 2020).

Self-care is increasingly recognized as fundamental to managing stress and ensuring workforce well-being. It has been integrated into policies of health and human services organizations as an ethical practice and a crucial component of professional life (Miller & Grise-Owens, 2020; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2022; National Academy of Medicine, 2019). Emphasizing self-care in educational programs may help prepare individuals to manage stress effectively in these demanding fields.

### **Self-Care in Social Work and Human Services**

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), which is social work's largest membership organization, defines self-care as "a choice and commitment to become actively involved in maintaining one's effectiveness as a social worker" (NASW, 2018, pp. 257-258). Definitions like this are often used to describe self-care among college students. The importance of managing self-care for social work students is apparent (Lee et al., 2019; Miller & Grise-Owens, 2019). In addition, there is evidence of the effectiveness of classroom-based self-care assignments and activities among social work students to enhance self-care skills (Lewis & King, 2019; Moore et al., 2011; O'Neil et al., 2019). Lee et al. (2019) emphasize the need for a 'culture' of self-care and that self-care "begins during educational training and continues as a lifestyle" (p. 21). Pyles (2020) encourages a transformative whole-self organizational approach for students and practitioners. Similarly, Lee and Miller (2013) stress the distinction and interconnection of professional self-care (i.e., practices that promote the use of self in a professional role) and personal self-care (i.e., practices that promote holistic health and wellness). However, little research is focused on an interdisciplinary approach to self-care to support student success. Therefore, more research is needed to expand frameworks that proactively and intentionally integrate self-care into interdisciplinary settings that support the community, students, faculty, and staff.

### **Self-Care in Nursing**

Nursing is recognized globally as an essential healthcare contributor, yet it is a complex discipline. Nursing practices in many settings hold numerous specialties, vast expertise, and varied entry levels for practice. Self-care is an element that nurses and nursing students need to prioritize (Williams et al., 2022). Incorporating self-care early in nursing education is imperative, not only to support the well-being and success of nursing students but also to ensure the quality of patient care and mitigate the economic burden associated with high attrition rates among new graduate nurses (Lewis et al., 2022; Twibell & St. Pierre, 2012).

Self-care practices help nursing students manage numerous stressors and serve as essential strategies for preventing burnout (Brommelsiek & Peterson, 2022). Despite its undeniable importance, self-care must be adequately integrated into the education, training, and competency development of nurses, nursing students, and faculty. While abundant literature espouses the importance of self-care, authors often and predominantly focus on nurses teaching patients about self-care (Younas, 2017). Godfrey et al. (2011) assert the need for more emphasis on integrating self-care principles into professional development. Still more than ever before, there is an urgent need to prioritize self-care in nursing education, as nurses in all healthcare settings are grappling with poor physical and mental health (Williams et al., 2022). Many nurses identify stress as the most common safety hazard, perpetuating fatigue and burnout, necessitating early education in self-care as a preventive measure (Blum, 2014; Brommelsiek & Peterson, 2022). Burnout, a leading cause of attrition from the nursing profession, puts both nurses and nursing students at a heightened risk of adverse outcomes, including suicide (Blum, 2014; Snyder, 2020; Twibell & St. Pierre, 2012; Ulupinar & Aydogan, 2021). Researchers agree that further investigation is required to explain best practices for incorporating self-care into nursing education (Blum, 2014; Godfrey et al., 2011; Snyder, 2020; Younas, 2021).

### **Self-Care in Exercise Science and Sport Management**

Exercise Science and Sport Management professionals engage in diverse careers across the health, fitness, sports, and recreation industries. Their expertise enables them to work in fitness centers, rehabilitation facilities, sports organizations, and community recreation programs. Exercise science professionals may specialize in athletic training, prosthetics and orthotics, physical therapy, sports psychology, exercise physiology, and cardiac rehabilitation. Sport management professionals specialize in various areas, including event and facility management, sports marketing, coaching, and athletic administration. Their expertise enables them to plan and execute sporting events, manage venues, promote teams and organizations, and develop strategies to enhance athletic performance.

Self-care within Exercise Science and Sport Management is necessary within the multi-billion-dollar sports and fitness industry, which continues to expand rapidly in the United States (Masteralexis & Hums, 2024). However, this growth comes hand in hand with significant challenges regarding work-life balance and organizational culture, often leading to high levels of stress, burnout, and turnover among professionals in the field (Dixon & Bruening, 2007; Graham et al., 2019; Mazerolle et al., 2008; Taylor et al., 2019). The systemic pressures within the sports industry frequently leave practitioners feeling overworked, undervalued, and struggling to maintain equilibrium, particularly evident in intercollegiate athletic departments where personal sacrifices are often required (Weight et al., 2021). Graham and Smith (2022) highlight various organizational factors exacerbating these challenges, including demanding workloads, inadequate support, and low salaries.

Given the stressors inherent in the sports industry, prioritizing self-care becomes paramount for individuals and organizations. Quartiroli et al. (2019) emphasize the role of self-care in mitigating work-life stress and ensuring the sustainability of careers in sports psychology. Goodman and Howard (2022) underscore the value of mindfulness practices for personal well-being among athletic trainers. Pawsey et al. (2021) demonstrate the benefits of daily mindfulness for sports coaches, enhancing recovery-related variables such as sleep, energy levels, and mood. Furthermore, self-care practices have proven beneficial for recreation therapists combating compassion fatigue (Wozencroft et al., 2019).

In defining sport psychology self-care, Quartiroli et al. (2022) offer a comprehensive perspective, emphasizing the purposeful engagement in activities aligned with one's values to preserve holistic well-being across physical, psychological, social, spiritual, and emotional dimensions. This holistic approach to self-care underscores the importance of prioritizing, developing, protecting, and restoring one's health and satisfaction within work life. However, neglecting self-care can severely impact practitioners, their clients, and the profession (Barnett et al., 2007). This ethical imperative extends beyond sports psychology to other healthcare areas like athletic training and physical therapy, highlighting its universal importance.

### **Self-Care in Health Promotion and Physical Education**

Some of WCHHS's academic units include multiple disciplines. For this reason, self-care literature related to disciplines associated with the Department of Health Promotion and Physical Education was divided into majors, including public health, integrated health science, and health and physical activity leadership.

The public health profession is dedicated to protecting and improving the health of populations through education, promoting healthy lifestyles, conducting research to prevent disease and injury, and responding to infectious disease outbreaks (CDC, 2014.). While self-care efforts have been encouraged by public health officials (Anger, 2023; Nagarajan, 2024; Sovold et al., 2021), there is only preliminary research suggesting that educational programs in public health have attempted to address this need.

*Public health* graduates pursue careers in biostatistics, epidemiology, health policy and management, environmental health, and public health education. These professionals often serve at the forefront of managing and responding to public health crises that pose significant threats to their health and well-being (Nagarajan, 2024; Stone et al., 2023). Due to these professionals' critical roles, there is growing recognition of the need for self-care among public health current and future professionals. Perez et al. (2023) found high levels of daily burnout symptoms, such as high levels of emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, and low levels of sense of accomplishment among public health students; this highlights the need for institutions to address health and well-being concerns. Therefore, based on the prevalence of high stress levels and poor coping strategies among public health students, more institutions are examining the integration of curricula and initiatives to enhance self-care behaviors. In one public health program, researchers implemented an intervention involving graduate coursework that encouraged self-care behaviors aligned with social and behavioral aspects of health. They found improvements in health-promoting behaviors and reduced mental health deterioration (White et al., 2018). A follow-up study indicated that delivering a behavioral self-care intervention online was just as practical, with newly developed self-care strategies positively impacting health outcomes, such as social life satisfaction and self-

reported health status (White et al., 2019). For public health students, developing targeted self-care interventions may reduce their stress and anxiety levels during their educational journey.

*Integrated Health Science* is an interdisciplinary field that involves the application of science to health-related areas. The WCHHS undergraduate program graduates are prepared to work in various health-related careers, such as health service management, quality improvement, occupational health and safety, clinical research oversight, and medical sales, or pursue a graduate degree in health care. Professionals working in these areas report high levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout due to high workloads, dealing with demanding patients/clients, and other workplace-related conflicts (Prasad et al., 2021). Similarly, students majoring in the health sciences experience an increase in levels of anxiety, stress, exhaustion, burnout, and depressive symptoms (Almutairi et al., 2022; Ayoub et al., 2021; Bullock et al., 2017; Korolkiewicz et al., 2022; Mane et al., 2011; Wyatt & Oswalt, 2013). In addition, it appears that health science students experience a decrease in mental well-being over their course of study (Hoying et al., 2020) and develop maladaptive coping mechanisms such as reduced physical activity, poor nutrition choices, substance misuse, and irregular sleeping patterns before graduation (Ickes et al., 2015; Korolkiewicz et al., 2022; Oswalt & Wyatt, 2014; Smetaniuk et al., 2017).

*Health and Physical Activity Leadership* is also an interdisciplinary program that includes teacher education, coaching, and youth activity leadership. Most students in this major pursue certification as Health and Physical Education teachers. Emerging research on self-care in teacher education suggests that it may play a critical role in preparing future educators to manage the many demands of the professional effectively (Baker, 2020; Juarez & Becton, 2022). K-12 education faces ongoing teacher workforce shortages, which have intensified since COVID-19 due to fewer students pursuing education-related degrees (Schaeffer, 2022) and annual turnover rates rising to nearly twenty percent (Bleiberg & Kraft, 2022; Diliberti & Schwartz, 2021; Goldhaber & Theobald, 2022). While systemic improvements are needed to address teacher attrition and support retention, a focus on student well-being and self-care is also needed within educational settings.

### **Overall Summary of Literature Review**

Within the interdisciplinary literature, there are examples underscoring the integration of and need for self-care among the various health and human services professions (Pyles, 2020; Quartiroli et al., 2022; Wilgens & Palombaro, 2019). Multiple researchers asserted that workshops on self-care and well-being, particularly when integrated early in the program, help decrease perceived stress, increase coping strategies, and enhance interprofessional understandings of wellness and self-care (Vermeesch et al., 2022; Dietz et al., 2022). However, the literature lacks an integrative framework of proactive prevention versus reactionary approaches. Thus, it emphasizes the need for a more holistic prevention approach to self-care that includes students and faculty using an evidence-based, personalized, and inclusive intervention plan (Kourea et al., 2023). The following section will present one example of a holistic self-care framework that addresses this gap.

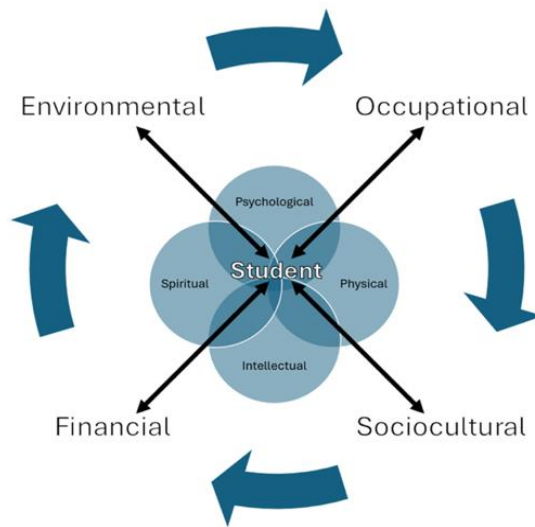
### **SELF CARE FRAMEWORK**

The interdisciplinary team developed a self-care framework within the auspices of the student success ecosystem already created. Drawing on our collective expertise and perspectives and focusing on the existing literature from various health and human services disciplines, we gained valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of self-care as an element of wellness within student success. The team's next step was to establish an operational definition of self-care. This definition was established by meticulously reviewing existing health and human service self-care literature, synthesizing that literature, and collaboratively distilling that information. Before finalizing the definition, it was shared with college leadership and a collaborative student group for feedback, ensuring all stakeholders were part of the process. After incorporating suggested revisions, a self-care operational definition emerged: *'Self-care is an individualized intentional practice of meeting one's holistic needs.'*

Subsequently, a self-care framework was formed to identify the dimensions (See Figure 2). The framework acknowledges the interconnectedness of various aspects of students' lives. The self-care framework integrates various elements that extend beyond academic concerns and encompasses eight dimensions of self-care: four internal (physical, spiritual, intellectual, and psychological) and four external (occupational, sociocultural, financial, and environmental) of self-care.

Figure 2 shows that the student is at the center, surrounded by four interacting internal dimensions that influence and are influenced by four interacting external dimensions. The internal and external dimensions interact in a unifying relationship that supports and contributes to student success and overall self-care.

**FIGURE 2**  
**A MULTIDIMENSIONAL THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK OF SELF-CARE FOR STUDENT SUCCESS**



These eight dimensions are interconnected, in which changes in one dimension potentially affect others. The theoretical framework was intentionally designed to acknowledge the dynamic nature of student needs, emphasizing that achieving balance among all dimensions is fluid and context-dependent. It guides understanding and addressing students' evolving needs, recognizing that achieving a perfect balance among all dimensions is neither necessary nor feasible. Instead, the theoretical framework provides comprehensive support tailored to each student's unique circumstances and experiences within the educational ecosystem. After the interprofessional team identified the eight dimensions of the theoretical framework for self-care, the next step was to define each dimension for the WCHHS based on the literature. Table 1 defines each of the eight dimensions, with a more detailed description of each in the next section.

Each dimension is crucial in shaping students' overall wellness and success. The following sections will provide more detailed descriptions of the four internal and four external dimensions of self-care based on existing literature relevant to each discipline within the WCHHS. While each dimension possesses unique characteristics, it is essential to recognize that they often overlap. Many elements cannot be strictly confined to just one category or dimension. Instead, these dimensions intersect in complex ways, demonstrating that real-world phenomena do not always fit neatly into an isolated dimension.



**TABLE 1**  
**DEFINITIONS OF THE THEORETICAL MODEL SELF CARE EIGHT DIMENSIONS**

<b>Dimension</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Internal dimensions</b>	
<i>Psychological self-care</i>	Consists of one's ability to self-regulate emotions and cope with stress.
<i>Physical self-care</i>	The ability and time to care for one's body through adequate nutrition, exercise, regular doctor visits, sleep, healthy sexual relations, and reduced use of licit (i.e., cigarettes and alcohol) and illicit (i.e., marijuana, cocaine, heroin, etc.) substances.
<i>Intellectual self-care</i>	Level of academic success fostered through investment in educational pursuits.
<i>Spiritual self-care</i>	Encompasses purpose, meaning, and connection to something greater than oneself through the expression of one's values, beliefs, and existential questioning and practices.
<b>External dimensions</b>	
<i>Sociocultural self-care</i>	Engagement in meaningful healthy relationships and social support, including peers, family, mentors, institutions, organizations, and the broader community.
<i>Occupational self-care</i>	Includes the freedom of career exploration and level of career preparedness for future employment.
<i>Financial self-care</i>	Involves access to financial resources and one's knowledge and ability to budget, manage debt, pay living expenses, and save for future short- and long-term goals.
<i>Environmental self-care</i>	The connection between the individual and their natural surroundings that are supportive, safe, clean, and free of ecological hazards (i.e., pollutants, toxins, waste, etc.).

### **Internal Self-Care Dimensions**

#### *Psychological Self-Care*

Psychological self-care is a broad and multifaceted term encompassing various aspects of an individual's mental and emotional state, cognitive processes, and overall psychological functioning. It incorporates emotional health, mental health, coping strategies, self-awareness, and cognitive functioning, all crucial for promoting optimal well-being and quality of life (Posluns et al., 2020). Emotional health involves understanding, managing, and expressing positive and negative emotions effectively. Positive emotions like joy and gratitude contribute to overall well-being, while negative emotions like sadness and anxiety require acknowledgment for optimal psychological health (Posluns et al., 2020; Waters et al., 2022). Mental health encompasses factors including acknowledgment of mental health diagnosis. Coping strategies are essential for managing stress, regulating emotions, and adapting to challenging situations (Myers et al., 2012; Waters et al., 2022). Self-awareness and self-reflection are crucial for recognizing and understanding one's thoughts, feelings, and behaviors, facilitating personal growth and authenticity

(Kennedy et al., 2022; Posluns et al., 2020). Self-compassion and flexibility guide emotional regulation and support adaptive coping strategies that support psychological self-care (Kennedy et al., 2022; Posluns et al., 2020). In order to promote psychological self-care, commitment and intention are needed to implement self-care practices within clinical training programs and quality assurance processes in professional health and human services.

### *Physical Self-Care*

Physical self-care involves caring for one's body to maintain overall health, which is particularly crucial for college students. This dimension typically encompasses nutrition, exercise, weight management, tobacco and vape use, disease prevention, sleep, alcohol use/misuse, and healthy sexual relations. Physical well-being is a cornerstone of student life. It does not only reference individual elements like nutrition, exercise, or sleep but also about how these elements interact and influence each other. These subcategories are interconnected, with deficiencies in one area potentially leading to problems in another. For instance, lack of sleep can lead to unhealthy food choices and weight gain (Henry et al., 2018; Kolodinsky, J., Harvey-Berino, J. R., Berlin, L., Johnson, R. K., & Reynolds, T. W. (2007). Unfortunately, poor eating habits and unhealthy food choices are prevalent among college students, as they tend to develop during this phase of life (Crombie et al., 2009). Poor nutritional habits and the lack of dietary recommendations for college students are well-documented issues (Henry et al., 2018; Kolodinsky et al., 2007). Thus, while college life presents numerous growth opportunities, it also necessitates a holistic approach to managing the interconnected aspects of physical wellness and stress management.

### *Intellectual Self-Care*

Intellectual self-care fosters cognitive growth and lifelong learning and is paramount to personal and professional growth (Mlambo et al., 2021). It is required for maintaining mental agility and overall intellectual health (Brooker et al., 2019). Scholarly research supports this importance. Engaging in practices such as reading, puzzles, strategic games, and discussions can significantly enhance cognitive function (Brooker et al., 2019; Mlambo et al., 2021). For instance, studies have shown that frequent engagement in word puzzles and other mental exercises can help maintain sharper cognitive functions later in life (Brooker et al., 2019). Self-care within the intellectual dimension is not just about engaging in activities that stimulate and challenge the mind. Continuous learning through formal education, professional development courses, or self-directed learning can keep the mind sharp and adaptable and is foundational in learning (Blair & Diamond, 2018; Mlambo et al., 2021). Intellectual self-care also includes critical thinking and reflection (Housman, 2017; Mlambo et al., 2021). It enables individuals to critically analyze their experiences and knowledge, fostering a deeper understanding and innovation (Mlambo et al., 2021). By prioritizing intellectual self-care, individuals can enhance their problem-solving abilities, creativity, and overall cognitive resilience by prioritizing intellectual self-care, contributing significantly to their personal and professional well-being (Housman, 2017). Therefore, it is crucial to recognize the importance of intellectual self-care for personal and professional growth and to motivate individuals to prioritize it.

### *Spiritual Self-Care*

The spiritual dimension of self-care involves finding purpose, meaning, and connection through one's values, beliefs, and existential practices (Rykkje et al., 2022). Unfortunately, the spiritual dimension of self-care is neglected or difficult to approach (Rykkje et al., 2022). Public academic settings may overlook the spiritual dimension to respect diverse beliefs and maintain neutrality, aiming to offer education free from religious or spiritual influences (Rykkje et al., 2022). Students come from varied religious, spiritual, and cultural backgrounds, and emphasizing a specific form of spiritual self-care could alienate some or be perceived as endorsing a particular belief system. Additionally, programs often focus on measurable outcomes such as academic achievement, skills development, and career readiness, making spiritual self-care's inherently subjective and personal nature challenging to quantify and assess (Rykkje et al., 2022).

Spiritual self-care involves practices that nurture the spirit and foster a sense of meaning and connection to something greater than oneself. Engaging in spiritual self-care can include meditation, prayer, attending

religious services, or spending time in nature, which helps individuals find purpose, inner peace, and connection to their values and beliefs. Studies have shown that incorporating spirituality into daily life is associated with better health outcomes, including reduced levels of depression and anxiety, enhanced coping skills, and greater resilience during illness. By recognizing the potential benefits of spiritual self-care, individuals can enhance their overall well-being and quality of life. Given health professions' high-stress and demanding nature, spiritual self-care offers students tools and practices to manage stress, prevent burnout, and build resilience, which is crucial for maintaining personal well-being and long-term career sustainability. Spiritual self-care practices can enhance empathy, compassion, and communication skills—essential for building strong, trust-based relationships with patients and clients and improving the healthcare environment (Rykkje et al., 2022).

## **External Self-Care Dimensions**

### *Sociocultural Self-Care*

The socio-cultural dimension of self-care involves creating a sense of belonging through connections with nature, others, and organizations that promote a culture of self-care, including attributes, beliefs, values, and norms (Lee & Miller, 2013; Link & Ramanathan, 2011; St. Amand et al., 2017; Younas, 2017; Pyles, 2020). To achieve holistic well-being, nurture healthy relationships, and stay engaged in supportive environments (Lee & Miller, 2013). Positive stress management often results from interpersonal relationships (Younas, 2016). Therefore, active participation in our communities (e.g., professional events, social functions, family outings) and maintaining essential relationships (e.g., with family, friends, and significant others) are crucial (Lee & Miller, 2013; Pyles, 2020; Younas, 2017).

The shift from viewing self-care as an independent pursuit to one that involves our surrounding environment is evident (Lee & Miller, 2013; Pyles, 2020). University spaces such as classrooms, offices, departments, colleges, and communal areas play a crucial role in student success and sense of belonging when they foster a rich self-care culture emphasizing inclusivity and recognizing diverse experiences and self-care needs (Wade-Berg et al., 2023). As part of the university community, everyone has the power to contribute to this culture. We can create a welcoming atmosphere by integrating self-care into mission statements, curricula, faculty and leadership modeling, and community-building within the university, degree programs, departments, and colleges (Pyles, 2020; Lewis & King, 2019; O'Neil et al., 2019). This collective effort can significantly enhance the overall well-being of the university community.

### *Occupational Self-Care*

Occupational self-care is essential for both individual well-being and organizational success (Downing et al., 2023; Kennedy et al., 2022). Research indicates that healthcare employees who feel supported by their organization are more productive and experience greater job satisfaction (Downing et al., 2021). Support for future employees begins prior to entering the professional workforce. Educators and administrators are critical in preparing students for their professions and handling burnout and extreme stress in their professional roles (Alvarez et al., 2023). Emphasizing self-care early in the academic journey helps students manage stress across various occupational settings (Alvarez et al., 2023). Incorporating stress reduction, time and workload management, and prioritization into program curricula is essential for adequately preparing students for their future careers (Alvarez et al., 2023; Downing et al., 2021). Therefore, connecting students with appropriate resources at their institutions is crucial, such as advisement, student learning assistants, tutoring, mentorship programs, and career development services (Alvarez et al., 2023). Mentorship between faculty members and students, particularly in healthcare professions, is one of the most valuable resources within a college (Alvarez et al., 2023). Students should also seek internship and externship opportunities within their colleges and in external settings to allow the freedom of career exploration. This sense of community and support is vital in helping students navigate the challenges they may face in their academic and professional journeys (Alvarez et al., 2023).

### *Financial Dimension*

Financial well-being is essential for overall health and quality of life. Financial literacy increases financial self-care, enabling students to make informed fiscal decisions. Financial literacy encompasses managing expenses, preparing for and recovering from the ebbs and flow of markets, and building wealth over time. Students must receive financial counseling before starting college, as essential skills like budgeting, managing personal finances, saving, and handling debt can help them better navigate financial challenges (Robb, 2017). These skills prepare students to handle unexpected expenses, such as medical bills and car repairs, more effectively. This financial literacy reduces stress and enhances overall well-being (Lusardi & Messy, 2023; Robb, 2017). Promoting financial well-being through education and support services is critical for helping students achieve stability and success during and after college (Robb, 2017).

To help alleviate this financial stress, some students take on part-time work. While financial support may be helpful, working more hours reduces study time, ultimately affecting academic performance and well-being (Robb, 2017). Many colleges offer community services like food pantries, clothing swaps, and discount programs for essential items (Harris et al., 2016). Students must be aware of these resources provided by their universities or affiliated organizations (Harris et al., 2016). Additionally, some schools may offer emergency financial assistance or grant programs that can provide further support in times of need. Encouraging students to utilize these resources can help them manage their financial stress more effectively, allowing them to focus on their academic and personal well-being (Wade-Berg et al., 2023).

### *Environmental Self-Care*

The environmental self-care dimensions encompass home, school, and workplace settings and play a significant role in student success. Ideally, these environments should be supportive, safe, collaborative, empowering, motivational, collegial, professional, respectful, caring, and satisfying (Saunders et al., 2021). The ideal environments will help students thrive in their learning and future work environments. Saunders et al. (2021) describe a “healthy work environment as a positive, supportive, safe, collaborative, empowering, motivational, collegial, professional, respectful, caring, and satisfying environment” (p. 2). Faculty leaders consider these descriptors when creating learning environments for students seeking to enter the health profession.

Likewise, a hostile environment in the classroom and/or clinical or field environment will impact and shape students’ experiences. Sometimes, negativity is referred to as a toxic work environment; it can contribute to stress and anxiety in novice clinicians. Events like the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent public health emergencies significantly intensified concerns about work environments and healthcare professions (Delgado, 2024). The concerns require academic leaders to address environments early in healthcare professional education.

Critical strategies for these improvements include implementing clear care goals, reducing division among healthcare teams, and decreasing workplace violence (Delgado, 2024). Each member must recognize their role and identify areas for improvement to enhance the work and learning environment. For example, offering tools to reduce student stress and anxiety by providing specialized programs or workshops, such as in a recent pilot study at another university, incorporates the Palouse Meditation Program and has shown promising results (Priebe & Kurtz-Costes, 2022). Integrating this program into the university environment through curricula or workshops could reduce school-related stress and promote healthier mental health as students approach graduation and employment.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

The potential benefit of integrating the presented theoretical framework has multiple practical, institutional, and research implications. The self-care theoretical framework for student success was generated from the WCHHS model. This innovative ecosystem for student success underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of factors influencing student outcomes. Academic leaders should consider adopting similar models to capture the multifaceted nature of student success and to promote environments where students can thrive academically, socially, and personally. The WCHHS model

recognizes wellness, readiness, and belonging as crucial elements of student success, highlighting the need for institutions to prioritize these factors. The model's integrated self-care strategies within Domain 4 offer a valuable approach to enhancing student well-being. Institutions should implement and evaluate self-care programs and interventions that address the unique needs of students in health and human services, ensuring that these programs are adequately supported and continuously refined based on feedback and outcomes. Lastly, the WCHHS's approach underscores the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in addressing complex issues like self-care. This collaborative spirit invites institutions to join a larger community working towards comprehensive student support systems. Future research should explore the effectiveness of such collaborative approaches and how they can be applied across different disciplines to enhance student success and well-being.

The self-care theoretical framework presented in the current article provides a multi-dimensional view of self-care that recognizes the interconnection of external and internal dimensions that helps guide and inform research and practice (i.e., curriculum, interventions, programs, etc.). Viewing self-care from a multi-dimensional perspective provides a holistic perspective that allows for the opportunity to address the needs of the entire student. In addition, it provides an expansive perspective that increases understanding that self-care is not one-dimensional and that students can have variability in how they approach self-care (e.g., engaging in activities that focus on one or multi-dimensions at one time).

The self-care theoretical framework is interdisciplinary and holistically encompasses health and human service programs. It is not solely focused on one specific discipline but is also sensitive to and recognizes the personal approach necessary to address students' individual needs. At present, no such model exists that approaches health and human services inclusive of multiple disciplines. The current framework provides one example that could be applied and expanded to fit other settings such as other disciplines, universities, colleges, or departments.

Responding to the need to develop a culture of self-care, the current framework outlines what dimensions are relevant to integrating self-care into curriculum and college programming. Through integration of self-care into student learning and developmental opportunities students will receive introductory support to infuse self-care now and in professional settings. Self-care should begin during professional training and has the potential for students to continue practices as a lifestyle (Lee, Miller, & Bride, 2019). Building on this perspective, this framework specifies which areas of self-care are most relevant to students in health and human service training programs.

Early integration of self-care during educational training can proactively mitigate issues linked to burnout and compassion fatigue (Lewis et al., 2022; Twibell & St. Pierre, 2012). Most approaches to self-care are reactive and work backwards to identify strategies to support those that are already experiencing disengagement from their respective field (Lee & Miller, 2013; Pyles, 2020). What's proposed in the current article is a framework that works to fuse academic learning with professional and personal self-care management. This approach places the student experience at the center and works to see the student as an individual and not as a commodity to support for the sake of continued production. Further research is needed into how wellness and self-care contribute to student success. Future studies should explore the relationships between these concepts and identify effective strategies for implementing and scaling self-care programs. Research should also investigate how interdisciplinary approaches can be optimized to support student success in diverse academic contexts.

The provided framework addresses the needs of the person and their well-being and provides students with the support needed to be whole.

## **DISCUSSION**

The evolving focus on student success within higher education highlights the importance of adopting comprehensive, holistic approaches to address student outcomes' complex and multifaceted nature. The shift from a traditional deficit perspective to a more inclusive understanding of student success, as exemplified by the WCHHS's Innovative Ecosystem for Student Success, underscores the need for integrating various domains—academic, career, and wellness—into cohesive support systems.

The WCHHS model illustrates how focusing on wellness, readiness, and belonging can significantly impact student success, offering a valuable example for other institutions to consider. By prioritizing self-care and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, institutions can develop more effective strategies to enhance student well-being and performance. This approach supports individual student success and aligns with broader institutional goals of operational efficiency and accountability.

COVID-19 and the rise in stress levels in health and human services fields are indicative of the need to prioritize self-care among students and professionals (Anthony & Vidal, 2010; Bae et al., 2019; Pipe et al., 2009; Lewis et al., 2022; Myers, 2017; Snyder, 2020). Models or frameworks of self-care exist but are focused on specific health and human service disciplines such as social work, nursing, or public health (Lee et al., 2019; Pyles, 2020; Wilgens & Palombaro, 2019). In addition, several definitions of self-care exist that are not specific to students or inclusive of multiple disciplines (NASW, 2018; Quartiroli et al., 2022). The current paper addresses this gap by proposing a holistic definition focused on health and human services students. In addition, emerging research supports integrating curricular and co-curricular initiatives to enhance self-care behaviors among students experiencing adverse outcomes (Reynolds, 2019). However, there is no current collaborative framework in the literature. This paper also helps fill this gap.

Engagement in self-care is viewed as one strategy to counteract work-related stress and burnout (Bae et al., 2019; Younas, 2017). However, growing perspectives have warned against the view of self-care as solely a means for people to be more productive and to manage or prevent negative consequences. Instead, greater attention has been given to self-care as a proactive and intentional holistic pursuit (Lee & Miller, 2013; Pyles, 2020). The current framework is one step towards proactive integration of self-care as a strategy to support students' well-being now and in the future.

As higher education institutions continue to evolve, it is crucial to regularly evaluate and refine student success models to ensure they meet students' diverse needs. Future research should build on these insights, exploring how different components of student support frameworks interact and contribute to positive outcomes. By embracing a holistic view of student success and investing in comprehensive support systems, academic institutions can create environments where students thrive academically, personally, and professionally.

## CONCLUSION

Self-care is dynamic and encompasses the integration of multiple dimensions of self. Based on a search of the robust literature on self-care in health and human services, the theoretical framework proposed in the current study includes multiple dimensions most prevalent to health and human services college students. This paper does not claim to be exhaustive; however, it presents a holistic framework of both external and internal dimensions that work together and can be utilized to address the well-being issue of college students. In addition, it provides a working conceptualization of how self-care is understood and manifested for college students to support the development of programs, services, modules, or interventions to aid student's self-care both now and into their future professions.

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