



Centering Student Wellbeing

Metropolitan State University of Denver
Denver, CO

April 2025

Aspen Forum for Community Solutions
Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP)

What if institutions centered student wellbeing as a core part of their institutional mission? What if the term “wellbeing” was thought through in detail and clearly defined in official college policy documents? What if it formed the backbone of all student services?

Metropolitan State University of Denver is working to answer these and other questions as they implement the college’s first ever Student Well-being Strategic Plan. Over the last two years, leaders have been working to align all student services with a wellness framework and plan to market student wellness as their core student engagement strategy. Leaders are also working to institutionalize their efforts by retooling data systems to better understand student wellness and by hiring their first ever Assistant Vice President of Health & Well-being.



The Aspen Institute’s Forum for Community Solutions (AFCS) promotes collaborative, community-based efforts that build the power and influence of those with the least access to opportunity, and supports communities to come together to expand mobility, eliminate systemic barriers, and create their own solutions to their most pressing challenges.

Our next decade of work continues to focus on ending youth disconnection. We endeavor to transform systems and communities in ways that ensure that all youth can thrive. Belonging, Meaning, Wellbeing and Purpose (BMWP) is the emerging framework that is helping us to get there.

Learn more about AFCS and our work to advance BMWP at <https://www.aspencommunitysolutions.org/bmwp>

The BMWP in Action Series provides postsecondary practitioners and funders with concrete examples of how a diverse group of leaders are implementing a wide range of approaches to foster belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose (BMWP) amongst their students. The goal of the series is to:

- 1 **Celebrate the work of case study institutions**
- 2 **Increase awareness of BMWP**
- 3 **Encourage the spread of these approaches as a strategy to improve racial equity and student success.**



MSU Denver students

LOCATION: (Photo by MSU Denver)

Denver, CO

INSTITUTION TYPE:

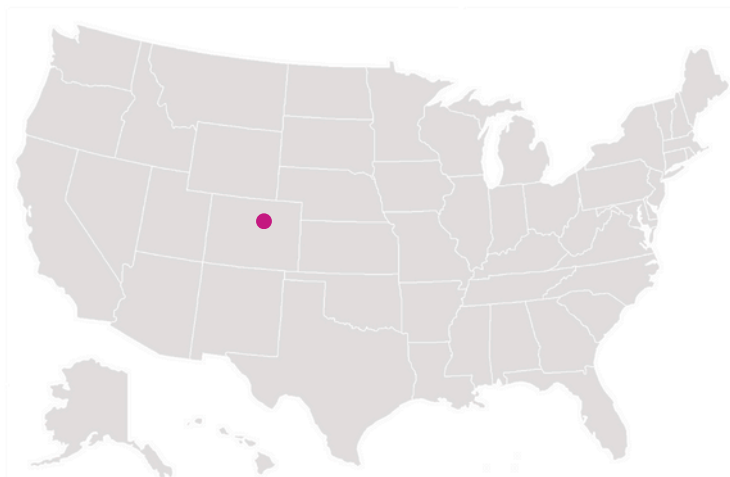
Public 4-Year

TOTAL UNDERGRADUATE ENROLLMENT:

16,430*

* Enrollment figure is from fall 2023. Data from US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics. [College Navigator](#).

Metropolitan State University of Denver



**METROPOLITAN
STATE UNIVERSITYSM
OF DENVER**



Policy and Practice Highlight

This document contains several **policy and practice highlight** callout boxes. Each box highlights a specific approach that this college is taking to help students cultivate a deeper sense belonging, meaning, wellbeing and purpose.

Context

Metropolitan State University of Denver (MSU Denver) is a comprehensive, broad access four-year college and a top transfer destination for students in Colorado. The college prides itself on its role as an affordable option for students and has been nationally recognized for civic engagement. Half of the college's undergraduate students identify as students of color — the college [received the Hispanic Serving Institution \(HSI\) designation](#) in 2019 — and nearly 60 percent are first-generation college-going students. The college adds unique value to the state workforce and economy: 96 percent of undergraduate students are from Colorado and nearly 80 percent of its alumni remain in the state post-graduation.¹

MSU Denver is a part of the Auraria Campus, which also houses the Community College of Denver and University of Colorado Denver. This tri-institutional configuration, managed by the [Auraria Higher Education Center](#), allows colleges to collaborate with shared services in some areas. For example, rather than constructing three separate health centers, enrolled students, faculty and staff from all three institutions have access to medical and mental health services through the [Health Center at Auraria](#).

In 2018, Will Simpkins joined MSU Denver as the Vice President of Student Affairs and got to work developing strategies for improving student wellbeing and connection to the campus community.² In 2019, Simpkins and staff **launched the [Student Care Center](#) which centralized student services on the campus**. The center helped reduce confusion about where students needed to go for specific services. The directive to students as well as faculty and staff was clear — if you don't know where to go for support, go to the Care Center.



Centralizing services at the Student Care Center is a strategy that promotes student wellbeing and belonging.

In 2022, Simpkins hired Taylor Tackett as Dean of Students and asked him to continue advancing the college's work on student wellbeing. Like other campuses across the country, MSU Denver was deeply impacted by the global COVID-19 pandemic and was eager to help students regroup in their campus experience. Searching for strategies, Tackett consulted a recent campus analysis of how students had put emergency grant dollars to use and came across a startling statistic: 80 percent of the flexible dollars that students received through this one-time cash transfer went to paying rent and avoiding eviction. For Tackett, this illustrated the scale of the challenge that students were facing.

MSU Denver hired a team of social workers to staff the Student Care Center and provide individualized support to students to help them meet their basic needs and connect them to public benefits. But even with this additional, centralized support the demand for support quickly outstripped the college's ability to provide it. Tackett shared that, “this is the moment when I stepped in and really started to recognize the need. We had a lot of really good intentions and a lot of really good programs, but they weren't scaled in a way that can sustainably meet student needs. And that's where this idea for the Student Well-being Strategic Plan came into play.”

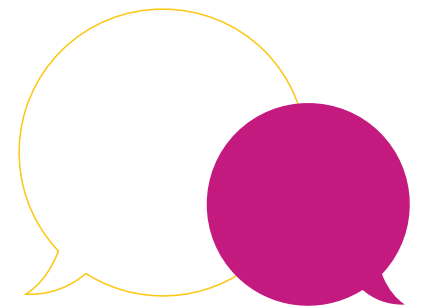
Co-constructing wellbeing

The MSU Denver Student Well-being Strategic Plan has its origins in a strategic planning process that the Student Affairs division kicked off in 2022. As a first phase, Student Affairs' staff and MSU Denver students collaborated to create broad goals for the department to pursue. These goals set into motion the next phase of the process: formation of a cross-institutional working group made up of students, faculty and staff. This group built on the goals by adding definitions and specific strategies that the college can pursue to advance student wellbeing on campus.

The MSU Denver Student Well-being Strategic Plan clearly articulates how the college defines wellbeing:

“Well-being is an ongoing and dynamic state that supports and encourages people to live a life that makes them feel satisfied, fulfilled, empowered, connected and which can be influenced by both individual and community factors.

Well-being is a multifaceted concept that may be assessed through the holistic lens of the 8 Dimensions of Wellness and is a shared responsibility of the individual and the institution.”



Metropolitan State University of Denver Student Well-being Strategic Plan

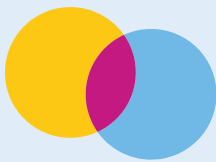
Though it is only two sentences, this wellbeing definition is vital to the college's efforts for several reasons. First, it clearly outlines what wellbeing looks like for the college (student satisfaction, fulfillment, empowerment and connectedness). Second, it situates wellbeing not just as an individual issue, but as an outcome that can be influenced by community and structural factors including campus life. Third, the definition is anchored in a pre-existing framework — one crafted by the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) — which delineates eight domains of wellbeing (emotional, spiritual, intellectual, physical, environmental, financial, occupational and social).³ Finally, the definition includes an accountability framework by clearly positioning wellbeing as shared responsibility of individual students and the college.



The Eight Dimensions of Wellness

MSU Denver anchored its student wellbeing framework on a pre-existing wellbeing framework in use by the US Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA).

Learn more about the framework [here](#).



The MSU Denver plan also describes key strategies for integrating the college-wide definition into its work through discrete tactics like:

- Including the definition of wellbeing in new student and new employee handbooks
- Launching a “Student Well-being Hub” on the MSU Denver website
- Centering wellbeing in the physical campus environment — e.g., creating a dedicated community/wellbeing space, increasing the presence of natural plants in campus buildings and increasing access to “nap pods or other sleep promoting tools”
- Centralizing and increasing access to wellbeing resources — e.g., creating a student resource list, integrating resources into Canvas and creating a “cultural engagement guide” to ensure resources are available to students of all backgrounds
- Deepening investment in the food pantry, housing supports and other basic needs services

Simpkins, Tackett and their colleagues know their students well. MSU Denver is largely a commuter campus which means, among other things, students' experiences are disproportionately shaped through their relationship with the faculty members who are teaching their courses. The wellbeing plan describes several tactics to help ensure that student wellbeing penetrates the classroom environment. First and most foundational, the plan outlines an intention to embed student wellbeing statements into course syllabi. This means that — at a minimum — all classes at the university will reinforce the college's definition of wellbeing and point students to key resources. But this is just the floor. The plan also describes strategies for integrating wellbeing into faculty professional development offerings — e.g., developing active listening and early intervention techniques into mandatory new employee training — and for finding ways to integrate wellbeing into curriculum. While these efforts will almost certainly take longer to achieve — the plan suggests a three year timeframe — they point to a “silo-busting” understanding that student affairs and academic affairs must be unified in their approach to student wellbeing.

Institutionalizing wellbeing through new systems and staffing

As the Student Well-being Strategic Plan enters an implementation phase, the college is making two important structural moves to ensure that it is institutionalized and sustained over the long haul. First, the college recently hired its first ever Assistant Vice President of Health and Well-being. This new role will be critical to the college as it works to implement the student strategic plan. Among other things, the AVP will be responsible for project management and, critically, ensuring that students stay at the table as a way to, “make sure that we're still on course for what they think is the right strategy.”



MSU Denver LatinX Fall 2024
Celebration (Photo by MSU Denver)

Second and equally important: the university will institutionalize its work through new investments in its data systems to help better understand who is in need of support, who is receiving support, and what impact those services are making.

Tackett shared that campus leaders are shifting their practices in the direction of data-informed decision making, but that information on student utilization of services and the connection to academic outcomes has been difficult for them to track. Tackett reflected on this gap in relation to the campus food pantry (known as Rowdy's Corner). This student-led program, supported by the Health Center, started in a closet but has grown to serve an increasing number of students and now operates as "a walk-in grocery store" available to all enrolled students. The food pantry had over 2,000 unique transactions per week — a 25% increase between Fall 2024 and Fall 2023 — and has doubled their food deliveries to make even more food available to students.

While student demand for access to food has grown, Tackett acknowledges that, "one of the things that we need to elevate is data infrastructure. We don't currently have a lot of good information right now about who's coming in and using that resource. I think we're ready to start stepping into the second iteration of that where we understand the impact of that program." Data on program use is important not just to understand utilization — it can be helpful for making the case for additional funding and support. Tackett estimates that the college has spent an additional \$600,000 on food this year and he feels that better information can help them identify a path to long run sustainability.

Committing for the long haul

Through these and other efforts, the MSU Denver Student Affairs team is working to make student wellbeing the central organizing framework for all of their student engagement strategies and to support this framework through aligned staffing, data systems, marketing and other structures. Staff are currently mapping all student services to the eight domains of wellness and plan to use this in marketing materials so that the objective for all support structures is unambiguous. The team understands this as a seismic restructuring, but they understand the importance of advancing student wellbeing and are committed for the long haul.



MSU Denver Graduates
(Photo by MSU Denver)

Gratitude

The authors would like to thank Taylor Tackett (Associate Vice President, Student Engagement and Well-being) and Kristin West (Specialist Project Manager) for the generosity of time spent sharing the resources, stories and perspectives used to create this document.

The authors strived to represent the vibrancy of this effort with accuracy. We take full accountability for any errors.

End notes

¹MSU Denver (2023). 2023-24 Fast Facts: Launching Colorado's Changemakers.

² While the Aspen Institute uses the term "wellbeing" (no hyphen), MSU Denver uses "well-being." In this document, the authors use "wellbeing" unless naming a formal initiative/document or when quoting language from MSU Denver documents.

³ The SAMHSA framework is built on work by Margaret Swarbrick. See Swarbrick, M. (2006). A wellness approach. *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Journal*, 29(4), 311–314. <https://doi.org/10.2975/29.2006.311.314>.