Preserving Life, Guarding Dignity: A Muslim Hermeneutic of Well-Being in College

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In higher education, student well-being usually refers to mental health resources, belonging, stress management, or crisis prevention. That language often leaves the central question unclear. What does it mean to live well in a college community, and what conditions make such a life possible? Universities often place the burden on the student: manage time, seek help, remain resilient, recover quickly. A Muslim hermeneutic begins elsewhere. It considers whether the institution and the community protect the goods a person needs in order to live with dignity, clarity, and moral purpose.

That concern appears clearly in the Qur'an. In 2:195, the Qur'an warns, "Do not cast yourselves into destruction by your own hands," a verse often read as a prohibition against reckless self-endangerment.[1] In 5:32, it declares that whoever saves a life, it is as though he has saved all humankind.[2] These verses give preservation of life a broad moral force. They direct attention both to rescue in moments of danger and to the obligation to avoid ways of living that steadily damage the person. Well-being concerns whether a campus permits forms of strain, neglect, and depletion that erode life over time.

One of the central ideas in Islamic legal thought is the *maqasid al-shari'a*, often translated as the higher aims or purposes of the law[3]. In this tradition, law serves the protection of goods necessary for human flourishing. Life is one of those goods. Preserving life includes attention to the habits, pressures, and forms of neglect that wear a person down over time. A student may meet every visible measure of success and still become more anxious, more isolated, less able to think clearly, and less able to ask for help. In such cases, the injury begins well before anyone calls it a crisis.

A related concept is *amanah*, or trust.[4] In Islamic thought, human beings are entrusted with responsibilities before God and before one another. Life, intellect, and moral agency are not simply private possessions. They must be guarded. Under this view, overwork, humiliation,

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[1] Qur'an 2:195. Translation adapted from *The Study Quran*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: HarperOne, 2015).
[2] Qur'an 5:32. The verse states that whoever saves one life, it is as if he had saved all humankind. Translation adapted from *The Study Quran*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (New York: HarperOne, 2015).
[3] On the *maqasid al-shari'a*, or higher aims of Islamic law, see Jasser Auda, *Maqasid Al-Shariah as Philosophy of Islamic Law: A Systems Approach* (London: International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2008).
[4] On *amanah* as trust or entrusted responsibility, see Qur'an 33:72.

numbness, and self-neglect are failures of care. A campus culture that rewards exhaustion, praises constant availability, or treats depletion as evidence of seriousness falls short in its treatment of human life.

Another concept, *rahma*, usually translated as mercy or compassion,[5] brings the community more fully into the picture. The Qur'an repeatedly presents mercy as a mark of rightly ordered life. Mercy is not a passing feeling. It requires attention, responsiveness, and a willingness to treat another person's suffering as a real claim on one's own conduct. A student's hardship does not belong to that student alone in the sense that others may ignore it. A merciful community learns to notice strain early, before it becomes collapse.

These concepts also change the argument about wellness. The usual language of well-being often points toward comfort, support, or self-care. The *maqasid* direct attention to whether essential human goods are being protected. *Amanah* treats life and intellect as trusts rather than as instruments of performance. *Rahma* requires a community to recognize suffering before it becomes visible enough to demand response. The question is no longer whether students are coping adequately. The question is whether the institution has ordered its life in a way that protects human beings from predictable forms of damage.

Justice, or *'adl*, sharpens this further.[6] In Islamic thought, justice concerns giving things their due and refusing arrangements that distort human worth. A university may speak eloquently about support and inclusion while distributing attention, status, and opportunity in ways that leave many students overlooked. It may praise balance while reserving admiration for those who surrender the greatest portion of themselves to achievement. These are questions of justice, not only of tone or care. They concern the moral order of the institution.

A Muslim reading of college well-being therefore begins with a different question: what kind of person is the institution helping to form? Is the student becoming steadier, wiser, more capable of prayer, thought, friendship, honesty, and moral discipline? Or is the student becoming more efficient while growing more confused, more depleted, and less able to admit need? Preserving life includes protecting the mind from disorientation, the self from humiliation, and the community from growing accustomed to quiet suffering.

The contemporary language of wellness can make a campus sound caring while leaving harmful patterns in place. A Muslim hermeneutic asks more of the institution. A healthy college guards human life as a trust, protects the goods on which flourishing depends, and cultivates habits of mercy and justice strong enough to resist a culture of exhaustion. Well-being then becomes a shared responsibility. It involves preserving life, intellect, dignity, and moral accountability together.

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[5] On *rahma* as mercy or compassion as a central Qur'anic concept, see Qur'an 21:107 and 7:156.
[6] On *'adl* as justice, see Qur'an 16:90 and 4:135.