

Student Experience and Wellbeing: Relationship-Rich Education, Well-Being, and Inclusive Environments

*Experiencia y bienestar estudiantil: educación enriquecedora,
bienestar y entornos inclusivos*

*Experiência e bem-estar do aluno: enriquecendo a educação, o
bem-estar e ambientes inclusivos.*

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Abstract

Universities worldwide are experiencing an inflection point that demands strategic, holistic action on the student experience and well-being. While student-centered education aligns with decades of research on human learning and critical pedagogy, its current urgency is intensified by demographic shifts, technological disruption, and social and economic pressures that have reshaped who studies, how they learn, and why they pursue higher education. Amid the rise of generative AI and post-pandemic challenges, universities must reaffirm their missions as human-centered institutions that cultivate belonging, purpose, and resilience for all members of their communities.

This paper argues that the future of higher education depends on deliberate and systemic strategies that integrate student experience and well-being into every level of institutional practice. The evidence demonstrates that relationship-rich education – characterized by meaningful interactions among students, faculty, and staff – is a foundational driver of learning, persistence, and flourishing. Strong academic and social relationships improve cognitive development, mental health, and student retention, while also enhancing faculty and staff thriving. Yet structural barriers, such as scale, technology misuse, and incentive misalignment, often undermine these connections.

To address these challenges, the report outlines eight strategic recommendations for university leaders:

1. Design relationship-rich learning ecosystems that integrate curricular and co-curricular experiences fostering collaboration, mentorship, and reflection.
2. Center relationships in the curriculum through active learning and “relationship accelerators,” such as mentored research and community-based projects.
3. Empower students as agents of change who partner with faculty and staff in course, curricula, and policy reform.
4. Cultivate a whole-of-university well-being strategy integrating student, faculty, and staff flourishing into planning and assessment.
5. Prioritize inclusive and participatory environments by committing to, aligning with, and investing in equity-driven practices.
6. Foster a human-centered approach to AI and technology that enhances learning while prioritizing relational integrity.
7. Reimagine professional development as relational growth built around communities of practice and collegial learning.
8. Reclaim the human core of higher education by embedding well-being, belonging, and purpose into institutional culture.

Taken together, these recommendations call for a strategic shift toward a relationship-rich, human-centered model of institutional excellence. By aligning mission, policy, and practice around student experience and well-being, universities can strengthen learning outcomes, promote equity, and advance the common good.

Keywords: Student experience; Well-being; Relationship-rich education; Belonging; Inclusion; Human-centered analytics; Partnership; Institutional culture

A note from the author: *I recognize that UCC’s educational model is rooted in critical pedagogy and applied, competency-based learning. These are fundamental assets to UCC’s strategic work on student experiences and well-being. As an outsider to Columbia and UCC, I do not have sufficient institutional or local knowledge to comment on how UCC’s mission, history, educational model, and context will – or could – shape the university’s strategic actions. I offer my analysis here with humility, trusting UCC’s team will integrate their own expertise with my perspectives on research and practice in global higher education.*

Resumen

Las universidades de todo el mundo están experimentando un punto de inflexión que exige acciones estratégicas e integrales para la experiencia y el bienestar estudiantil. Si bien la educación centrada en el estudiante se alinea con décadas de investigación sobre el aprendizaje humano y la pedagogía crítica, su urgencia actual se ve intensificada por los cambios demográficos, la disrupción tecnológica y las presiones sociales y económicas que han transformado quiénes estudian, cómo aprenden y por qué cursan estudios superiores. Ante el auge de la IA generativa y los desafíos pospandémicos, las universidades deben reafirmar su misión como instituciones centradas en el ser humano que fomentan la pertenencia, el propósito y la resiliencia de todos los miembros de sus comunidades.

Este artículo argumenta que el futuro de la educación superior depende de estrategias deliberadas y sistémicas que integren la experiencia y el bienestar estudiantil en todos los niveles de la práctica institucional. La evidencia demuestra que una educación rica en relaciones, caracterizada por interacciones significativas entre estudiantes, profesorado y personal, es un motor fundamental del aprendizaje, la perseverancia y el desarrollo profesional. Las relaciones académicas y sociales sólidas mejoran el desarrollo cognitivo, la salud mental y la retención estudiantil, a la vez que impulsan el progreso del profesorado y el personal. Sin embargo, barreras estructurales como la escala, el mal uso de la tecnología y la falta de alineación de incentivos a menudo debilitan estas conexiones.

Para abordar estos desafíos, el informe describe ocho recomendaciones estratégicas para los líderes universitarios:

1. Diseñar ecosistemas de aprendizaje ricos en relaciones que integren experiencias curriculares y cocurriculares, fomentando la colaboración, la mentoría y la reflexión.
2. Centrar las relaciones en el currículo mediante el aprendizaje activo y "aceleradores de relaciones", como la investigación con mentoría y los proyectos comunitarios.
3. Empoderar a los estudiantes como agentes de cambio que colaboran con el profesorado y el personal en la reforma de cursos, currículos y políticas.
4. Cultivar una estrategia de bienestar para toda la universidad que integre el desarrollo profesional de estudiantes, profesorado y personal en la planificación y la evaluación.
5. Priorizar entornos inclusivos y participativos comprometiéndose, alineándose e invirtiendo en prácticas impulsadas por la equidad.
6. Fomentar un enfoque centrado en el ser humano para la IA y la tecnología que mejore el aprendizaje y priorice la integridad relacional.
7. Reimaginar el desarrollo profesional como un crecimiento relacional basado en comunidades de práctica y aprendizaje colegiado.
8. Recuperar el núcleo humano de la educación superior integrando el bienestar, la pertenencia y el propósito en la cultura institucional.

En conjunto, estas recomendaciones exigen un cambio estratégico hacia un modelo de excelencia institucional basado en las relaciones y centrado en el ser humano. Al alinear la misión, las políticas y las prácticas en torno a la experiencia y el bienestar estudiantil, las universidades pueden fortalecer los resultados de aprendizaje, promover la equidad y promover el bien común.

Palabras clave: Experiencia estudiantil; Bienestar; Educación basada en las relaciones; Pertenencia; Inclusión; Análisis centrado en el ser humano; Colaboración; Cultura institucional

Resumo

Universidades em todo o mundo estão vivenciando um ponto de inflexão que exige ações estratégicas e abrangentes voltadas para a experiência e o bem-estar dos estudantes. Embora a educação centrada no aluno esteja alinhada a décadas de pesquisa sobre aprendizagem humana e pedagogia crítica, sua urgência atual é intensificada por mudanças demográficas, disrupção tecnológica e pressões socioeconômicas que transformaram quem estuda, como aprende e por que busca o ensino superior. Diante da ascensão da IA generativa e dos desafios pós-pandemia, as universidades devem reafirmar sua missão como instituições centradas no ser humano, que promovem o senso de pertencimento, propósito e resiliência para todos os membros de suas comunidades.

Este artigo argumenta que o futuro do ensino superior depende de estratégias deliberadas e sistêmicas que integrem a experiência e o bem-estar dos estudantes em todos os níveis da prática institucional. Evidências demonstram que uma educação rica em relacionamentos, caracterizada por interações significativas entre alunos, docentes e funcionários, é um fator fundamental para a aprendizagem, a perseverança e o desenvolvimento profissional. Relações acadêmicas e sociais sólidas aprimoram o desenvolvimento cognitivo, a saúde mental e a retenção de alunos, além de promover o crescimento profissional de docentes e funcionários. No entanto, barreiras estruturais como escala, uso inadequado da tecnologia e incentivos desalinhados frequentemente enfraquecem essas conexões.

Para enfrentar esses desafios, o relatório delinea oito recomendações estratégicas para líderes universitários:

1. Projetar ecossistemas de aprendizagem ricos em relacionamentos que integrem experiências curriculares e extracurriculares, incentivando a colaboração, a mentoria e a reflexão.
2. Centralizar os relacionamentos no currículo por meio da aprendizagem ativa e de "aceleradores de relacionamento", como pesquisas com mentoria e projetos comunitários.
3. Empoderar os alunos como agentes de mudança que colaboram com o corpo docente e administrativo na reformulação de cursos, currículos e políticas.
4. Cultivar uma estratégia de bem-estar em toda a universidade que integre o desenvolvimento profissional de alunos, docentes e administrativos ao planejamento e à avaliação.
5. Priorizar ambientes inclusivos e participativos, comprometendo-se, alinhando-se e investindo em práticas orientadas pela equidade.
6. Promover uma abordagem centrada no ser humano para IA e tecnologia que aprimore a aprendizagem e priorize a integridade relacional.
7. Repensar o desenvolvimento profissional como crescimento relacional baseado em comunidades de prática e aprendizagem colegiada.
8. Resgatar a essência humana do ensino superior, integrando bem-estar, senso de pertencimento e propósito à cultura institucional.

Em conjunto, essas recomendações exigem uma mudança estratégica rumo a um modelo de excelência institucional centrado no ser humano e baseado em relacionamentos. Ao alinhar missão, políticas e práticas em torno da experiência e do bem-estar dos estudantes, as universidades podem fortalecer os resultados de aprendizagem, promover a equidade e impulsionar o bem comum.

Palavras-chave: Experiência do estudante; Bem-estar; Educação baseada em relacionamentos; Pertencimento; Inclusão; Análise centrada no ser humano; Colaboração; Cultura institucional

The urgent need for strategic action on the student experience and well-being

Universities around the world are devoting increasing resources and strategic attention to the student experience and well-being. While this student-centered movement aligns with critical pedagogy and research on human learning, in many contexts the primary forces driving this change have been demographic, economic, technological, and cultural. Over the past few decades across the world, transformations have occurred in *who* studies in higher education, the modality of *where and when* they learn, the purposes of *why* people go to university, and *how* students juggle academic work with other competing demands on their time. Unfortunately, in some contexts neoliberal funding models and therapeutic fads have contributed to the popular impression that student-centeredness is primarily about satisfying the “customer” or accommodating fragile student “snowflakes” (Haidt & Lukianoff, 2018). That negative framing, however, is false – or at least it ought to be false. Higher education institutions should act strategically on the student experience and well-being because these are foundational to learning, persistence, and academic success for all students– and this approach to education also contributes directly to the long-term thriving of both our graduates and our communities. In short, to fulfill our educational and social missions, universities must prioritize the learning experiences and well-being of all students.

The rise of generative Artificial Intelligence (AI), paradoxically, magnifies the importance of student-centeredness. While AI can do many things and is evolving rapidly, leading some to posit AI-centered conceptions of education, a recent UNESCO report underscores the importance of a “human-centred approach to AI” that leverages emerging technologies to address individual student’s goals and also persistent local and global challenges (2025). In practice, this includes a significant emphasis on cultivating core human capacities in students – curiosity and creativity, social and emotional intelligence, empathy and compassion, individual and collective agency (e.g., Raine & Anderson, 2025). If universities are to develop these “robot-proof” capabilities in our students, we need to center them in the curriculum and in co-curricular experiences (Aoun, 2017); we need to focus our educational activities on cultivating and forming graduates with deep disciplinary expertise, AI literacy, *and* essential human capacities. The future of higher education is human-centered.

At the same time, the temptation for students to substitute AI-generated outputs for their own academic efforts cannot be resolved by surveillance technologies and clever assessment techniques; nor should we return to decades-old ways of assessing student learning such as handwritten essays because those often are not

conducive to learning in the short-term nor are the authentic to how students will use their expertise after they graduate (Warner, 2018) – nor do they recognize that how we assess students’ learning powerfully influences their formation as professionals and people (Nieminen & Yang, 2023). Instead, to engage students in the difficult work of learning even as AI offers a quick and easy (if not necessary accurate or insightful) answer to any question, faculty and staff need to build trusting relationships that will motivate and support students to persist through struggle and to value the time and effort necessary to truly learn and grow (Felten & Forsyth, 2025). Even as higher education adapts to and deploys AI to meet our mission, we must center the humans at the heart of teaching and learning – again, requiring a deeply student-centered strategy.

A core part of this strategy must involve critical attention to the well-being of students – and faculty and staff. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified and accelerated long-term trends that have increased social isolation, financial strains, and other pressures on personal and shared well-being. A recent report from Ireland’s Higher Education Authority succinctly describes one of the crucial implications of these trends:

Student success is no longer viewed exclusively in terms of academic achievement. It clearly includes both the academic and personal growth of a student, including the student’s practical career skills, mental well-being and resilience in the face of mounting external pressures... At the same time, mental health is emerging as a cornerstone of student success. Students face stress, anxiety, and uncertainty—challenges compounded by financial pressures, long commutes, and the need to balance work with study demands. (2025, pp. 19-20)

The holistic well-being of students is critical to achieving their educational aspirations and to universities fulfilling our missions. A commitment to well-being need not transform the university into a counseling center, however; indeed, a large study in Australia found that while a range of institutional resources are important to student thriving, the classroom – specifically the quality of teaching, the relationships formed in academic settings, and the perceived fairness of assessments – are foundational to student well-being at university (Baik et al., 2019). Once again, student-centeredness in and beyond the curriculum is essential to the university’s mission, and to supporting student well-being.

This paper will explore how strategic action focused on relationship-rich education and inclusive, participatory environments enable student transformation – and support faculty and staff thriving – in an increasingly diverse and technology-infused university. The paper will conclude with eight evidence-informed recommendations for whole-of-university approaches to student experiences and well-being.

Why Relationship-Rich Education?

Decades of research demonstrates that human relationships are a primary lever for supporting student learning, motivation, well-being, and persistence in higher education. Meaningful student interactions with faculty and staff positively contribute to “the breadth and depth of student learning, retention, and graduation rates, and a wide range of other outcomes, including critical thinking, identity development, communication skills, and leadership abilities’ (Felten & Lambert, 2020, p. 5). Positive student-faculty interactions also increase students’ academic self-concept and achievement (Parker et al., 2021), mental well-being (Baik et al., 2019), and identity development (Bovill et al., 2023). Relationships with university faculty and staff are significant for all students, and they are particularly influential for first-generation undergraduates and for students from marginalized communities (Artze-Vega et al., 2023).

Research also reveals that student-student peer interactions are “positively related to general learning, cognition, racial identity, intellectual/academic self-concept, autonomy, well-being, moral development, retention/graduation, and expected career outcomes” (Mayhew et al., 2016, p. 553). Student peer relationships are especially important for undergraduate mental health (Hefner & Eisenberg, 2009) and sense of belonging (Nunn, 2021). Meaningful peer interactions across differences (e.g. ethnicity/race, immigration status, religion, and so on) also support student learning and identity development while fostering crucial career skills linked to collaboration and intercultural competence (Milem, 2003; Artze-Vega et al., 2023).

Scholarship demonstrates that relationships not only help students succeed when they are attending university, but graduates who are able to develop meaningful human connections also are well-prepared to thrive personally and professionally. For instance, the Harvard Study of Adult Development (which, remarkably, has been running continually since 1938) has found that positive relationships are the single most important factor in a person being happy and healthy, and feeling purposeful, throughout their life; in short, the quality of relationships an individual has with family, friends, co-workers, and others are essential to “the good life” (Waldinger & Schulz,

2023). And the capacity to build and sustain relationships is crucial for flourishing communities, too. Democracy and constructive civic engagement require people who can work together despite sometimes profound differences (Appiah, 2007).

The benefits of relationships extend beyond students and graduates, too; university faculty and staff – and institutions as a whole – thrive when they have strong human connections at both the personal and organizational level. Post-pandemic burn-out has been an acute problem in higher education. Too often, however, the well-being of faculty and staff is framed as a personal rather than systemic and cultural problem (Pope-Ruark, 2022). While individual behaviors matter, strategic action by universities can support faculty and staff well-being and professional thriving in ways that counter broader social pressures toward stress, isolation, polarization, and despair (McClure, 2025). Doing that requires attending to the profoundly human and relational nature of working, learning, and being. In short, students, faculty, and staff – and our institutions and communities – benefit from relationship-rich environments.

Relationship-Rich Academic Experiences

The classroom, whether physical or virtual, is the primary point of contact between students and the university so it is the single most important site for students to develop meaningful relationships. Particularly for universities that serve students with work, family, and other outside obligations, the classroom *must* be relational; these students rarely can engage in co-curricular activities to develop the human connections that will help them learn and thrive in higher education. The classroom is the core of their educational experiences (Felten & Lambert, 2020).

In many higher education contexts, at least four interlocking forces make relationship-rich education challenging to enact in the curriculum:

1. **Scale:** Simply put, there are so many more students than faculty. Sometimes the challenge is a single course enrolling hundreds of students; other times the number of students adds up for faculty teaching multiple courses.
2. **Technology:** The same technologies that enable 24/7 connection – like mobile phones – also encourage superficial interaction and divided attention. And generative AI offers a new enticement to disconnect from humans.
3. **Modality:** The modalities of teaching and learning often discourage building academic relationships. Asynchronous online courses and huge lecture halls both convey to students – and to the academic teacher – that learning is a solitary act. And despite the appealing convenience of distance and

hybrid modalities, students often struggle with learning, motivation, and well-being when they feel alone in their education.

4. Incentives: The informal choice architectures and formal incentive structures at universities often encourage faculty to spend their time on something other than teaching and students. And many students do not understand the value of relationships for their academic success and well-being, so they perceive human interactions as a waste of their time.

Individually these barriers are significant and taken together they can make relationship-rich curricular experiences seem impossible. However, strategic action can shift the calculus by creating a relationship-rich culture that supports students and faculty connecting meaningfully in every course (Hallett et al., 2023). This strategy requires deliberate and research-informed actions by faculty and academic leaders. This approach also often requires shifting mindsets about teaching, learning, and relationships. For instance, the challenge of scale can be diminished if we shift away from the common expectation of one-on-one faculty-student relationships (which can be transformative but are nearly impossible to scale) to emphasize educationally purposeful interactions *among and between* students; any relationship-rich strategy must leverage the power of student peer academic connections because these not only are evidence-based but they also can be scaled to any size course or program.

One strategic way to do this is to systematically enact high-quality structured active learning pedagogies across the curriculum. Research demonstrates that active learning increases student learning (Freeman et al. 2014) and narrows achievement gaps among students from different backgrounds (Theobald et al. 2020) in introductory university STEM courses (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics). However, simply offering students optional opportunities to connect is not enough, particularly in large enrollment in-person or online asynchronous courses where students often feel isolated and anonymous (Glazier, 2021). Instead, active learning should be structured into course design across the curriculum, making this relational pedagogy required of and rewarding for all students (Hogan and Sathy 2022). One particularly impressive study shows that structured peer interactions are central to student learning in large enrollment biology courses, regardless of whether those courses are taught online, in-person, or in a hybrid format (Gavassa et al. 2019). To support structured active learning across the curriculum regardless of modality, the university must commit to strategic investments in educational development that helps faculty teach effectively and also to aligning faculty professional incentives with relational teaching practices (Austin et al., 2025).

A second strategic approach is to embed a range of discipline-appropriate “relationship accelerators” across the curriculum (Felten et al. 2023, Chapter 7). Relationship accelerators are academic experiences that are based in structured and purposeful educational interactions; in the U.S. these experiences are sometimes called “high-impact practices” or HIPs (Kuh, 2008), yet that framing is too narrow to capture the full range of relationship accelerators that can drive student connection, motivation, well-being, and learning. Structured active learning is a classroom-based example, as are course-based undergraduate research, simulations and case studies, and laboratory and studio pedagogies; mentored research, internships, and community-based learning are instances of curricular relationship accelerators that typically happen outside of traditional classroom formats. Different academic programs align better with different relationship accelerators, so business students might be required to engage in an intensive internship to work side-by-side with professionals in a corporation while history students might collaborate with curators at a local museum to create an exhibition. In all cases, relationship accelerators should be integrated into the curriculum and should include scaffolded reflection to maximize students’ learning. As with structured active learning, strategic investment and support is necessary to ensure these experiences meet their full academic and relational potential.

A third strategic approach to relationship-rich academics is to cultivate “students as partners” – sometimes called “co-creation” – initiatives across the curriculum. Students as partners (SaP) is a pedagogical and reform approach – closely associated with critical pedagogy – that has been embraced over the past two decades by many academics and higher education institutions around the world. SaP involves students and faculty working in collaboration, as partners, to improve teaching and learning experiences; it is a “reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision-making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp. 6-7). Although SaP often exists in isolated pockets on a campus, some institutions have developed robust whole-of-university approaches to partnership; for instance, the University of Western Sydney, Australia, has a long-standing, impressive partnership program aimed at co-creation of curriculum, co-researching student experiences, and driving institutional change – including the co-creation of fifteen transdisciplinary “Challenge Minors” on topics such as migration, sustainability, and humanizing data, and also the co-creation of short virtual “Curiosity Pods” designed to spark student interest in challenging but often unfamiliar areas of study (<https://www.wsustudentpartners.com/curriculum>). This kind of innovative partnership requires sustained strategic support from the university to develop

a culture of partnership that informs all aspects of the curriculum and the student experience (Peseta et al., 2020).

All three of these examples of strategic relationship-rich experiences across the curriculum empower students to be active agents of their own education – contributing to learning, well-being, and belonging for all students. Doing this requires the curriculum to teach students about the significance of human relationships for learning and well-being in (and beyond) higher education and also to systematically help students develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to develop academic relationships; institutions cannot leave this relational work to chance (Felten et al., 2023). These examples also underscore the importance of sustained strategic attention to both educational development that supports relational pedagogies and institutional policies and incentive structures that reward faculty and staff for relational work.

Relationship-Rich Experiences Beyond the Curriculum – For All

The classroom and curriculum are vital for relationship-rich education, yet many opportunities exist beyond the curriculum to support the learning and well-being of all students – and also of faculty and staff. Strategic efforts should aim to nurture a relationship-rich institutional culture. Recent large-scale research on U.S. higher education demonstrates that strategic attention to institutional culture, rather than creating specialized programs for targeted populations, is the most effective route to learning, well-being, and success for everyone at a university (Arney et al., 2023; Hallett et al., 2023). Three strategic approaches are particularly promising for cultivating a relational culture across a large and complex university – systematically leveraging student leadership, technology and analytics, and professional development.

First, students can and should be active agents of and leaders in relational practices at the university. This requires a wide range of opportunities for students to contribute to university initiatives, with careful mentoring and training to develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence they need to thrive as leaders. If such student roles are compensated then the experience “delivers the triple benefit of assisting with college expenses, developing valuable professional skills, and more deeply engaging them on campus – especially important for commuting, remote, and high-financial need students” (Felten & Lambert, 2020, p. 101). Student leadership roles can and should take a variety of forms from student representatives in governance structures and students as partners in curricular reform and institutional research (like at the University

of Western Sydney, referenced above) to students as trained learning assistants embedded in introductory courses and peer advisors in crucial student-facing university offices (such as academic advising, registration, and career services). In these many roles, students directly shape institutional culture through their actions and also model empowerment that influences how everyone at the university – students, faculty, and staff – envision students as active partners in the educational mission.

Second, the university can strategically employ technology and analytics to both enable and monitor its relational culture. Since a separate paper is being written on this topic, I will be very brief on this very important issue. Existing and emerging technologies hold great potential to support learning, well-being, and relationships, although they also can undermine those very same things if not used with care. In a proposal for “human-centred learning analytics” four leading scholars argue:

The complexity of embedding innovative technology in authentic contexts is as much a human challenge—cognitive, social, organizational, political—as it is a technical challenge.... The essence of adopting a human-centred approach is that the meanings, interaction opportunities, functions, and attributes associated with the system should be defined by the people for whom the system is intended, rather than imposed by designers or researchers. (Buckingham Shum et al., 2019, p. 2).

For instance, higher education scholars have demonstrated the significance of students’ sense of belonging for their learning and well-being at university (Strayhorn, 2012) – and that belonging emerges directly from the relationships students form with peers, faculty, and staff (Kahu & Nelson, 2018). Despite its salience, belonging is difficult for universities to monitor with the necessary nuance and in real-time, limiting the effectiveness of institutional interventions. A new strand of learning analytics, “belonging analytics,” aims to address that challenge by “providing novel and dynamic insights into belonging, helping students better understand and develop a sense of agency in their own journeys through higher education, and allowing institutions to be more responsive to students’ evolving experiences and needs” (Lim et al., 2023, p. 2). Strategic investment in belonging or other human-centered learning analytics holds great potential to support relationship-rich practices and culture at the university.

Third, professional development for faculty and staff – sometimes called educational, faculty, or staff development – is another opportunity to both enact and nurture a relational institutional culture. Scholars of educational development around the world have demonstrated that lasting professional growth is most likely to emerge

from collegial relationships in “communities of practice” (Wenger, 1998) and through “significant conversations” (Pleschová et al., 2021). This requires re-framing most professional development activities away from mere “training” – although perhaps some compliance-related topics might merit didactic instruction – to more situated and relational experiences that will build professional capacity while simultaneously nurturing belonging, well-being, and connections that mirror the university’s student-centered approaches to education. This kind of holistic educational development (Sutherland, 2018) meets the needs of the institution and of the faculty and staff within it by recognizing that, just like learning, professional growth is a deeply human experience.

Inclusive and Participatory Environments

A relationship-rich culture presumes and requires environments where everyone feels they are a valued part of the community (Artze-Vega et al., 2023; McClure, 2025). Indeed, centering relationships and inclusion offers a welcome and humane respite for students, faculty, and staff who are immersed in today’s highly polarized and distracted world. Where else but the university will they find a community and culture dedicated to human growth, well-being, and connection? Nurturing this kind of environment is rooted in three strategic actions: commit, align, and invest:

- Institutional leaders must *commit* publicly and consistently to the goal of an inclusive and participatory university. Since this echoes the university’s mission and values, this kind of public commitment might seem unnecessary, but repeated affirmation of shared values is important to develop a cohesive culture.
- *Align* practices, policies, and experiences with the goal of nurturing inclusive and participatory environments. Misalignment is a chronic problem in universities (and other large, complex organizations) so procedures should be established to monitor and works towards alignment.
- *Invest* in inclusive and participatory environments. Too often, universities talk about inclusion but do not dedicate sustained resources (money, time, and strategic attention) to this work.

These three strategic actions – commit, align, and invest – are essential to nurturing relational, inclusive, and participatory environments across the university. Taken together, they magnify the power of day-to-day relational practices in and beyond the curriculum, creating a virtuous cycle where students, faculty, and staff feel

valued (Felten et al., 2016). Those feelings of inclusion and belonging spark individual and communal action that reinforces the relational culture, building resilience and trust that prepare the community to flourish through the shocks and tensions that periodically rock higher education institutions.

Recommendations

The following eight evidence-informed recommendations outline strategic approaches for student experiences and well-being:

- 1. Design Relationship-Rich Learning Ecosystems:** Create interconnected curricular and co-curricular experiences where students, faculty, and staff learn *with* and *from* one another through meaningful collaboration, mentorship, and reflection.
- 2. Center Relationships in the Curriculum:** Systematically embed structured active learning and relationship accelerators (e.g., mentored research, internships, and community-based learning) across all programs and modalities to ensure every student develops meaningful academic relationships.
- 3. Empower Students as Agents of Change:** Establish institutional structures that empower students as leaders, partners, and co-creators in designing learning experiences, institutional research, and policy initiatives.
- 4. Cultivate a Whole-of-University Well-Being Strategy:** Integrate student, faculty, and staff well-being into all institutional practices and policies, recognizing that thriving individuals are essential for institutional success and long-term community impact.
- 5. Prioritize Inclusive and Participatory Environments:** Commit to, align with, and invest in spaces and environments where every community member feels valued, included, and empowered to participate fully.
- 6. Foster a Human-Centered Approach to AI and Technology:** Employ technology and learning analytics (such as belonging analytics) to enhance – not replace – human connection, enabling personalized support while maintaining relational integrity in teaching and learning – and in faculty and staff working environments.
- 7. Reimagine Professional Development as Relational Growth:** Reimagine academic and staff development as collective learning communities focused on well-being, collegial trust, and shared purpose rather than isolated professional advancement.

- 8. Reclaim the Human Core of Higher Education:** Build a university culture that places human connection, learning, and well-being at the heart of all educational and administrative activities – no matter how technological innovations or other forces transform our world.

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