RELATIONSHIPS MATTER
moving relationship-rich experiences from the periphery to the center of undergraduate education

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WHAT WE KNOW...

• “Student-faculty interaction has a stronger relationship to student satisfaction with the college experience than any other involvement variable.” (Astin, 1979, p. 223)

• “…the intricate web of reciprocal relationships which binds students to the communal life of the institution.” (Tinto, 1987, p. 181)
WHAT WE KNOW...

• “If an employed graduate had a professor who cared about them as a person, made them excited about learning, and had a mentor who encouraged them to pursue their dreams, their odds of being engaged at work more than doubled, as did their odds of thriving in their well-being.” (Gallup-Purdue, 2014, p. 4)
WHAT WE KNOW…

• Student-faculty and student-student interactions are the most significant factors contributing to undergraduate student learning, motivation, identity development, well-being, graduation rates, and post-graduation career and civic outcomes. (Mayhew et al., 2016)

• These effects are “particularly strong” for “students of color and first-generation college students.” (Kezar & Maxey, 2014, p. 31)
“Those of us who have mentors just do better. It doesn’t matter if you are looking at higher education or corporate America, those of us who have mentors get more opportunities. We have broader networks. We make more money. We get more promotions. We report later on we are happier with both our career and our lives. We tend to feel more comfortable striking work and family integration. So for all these reasons, the benefits of mentoring really are not even in question any more.”

(Brad Johnson, United States Naval Academy)
385 students, faculty, and staff

29 institutions
FOUR GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. Every student must experience genuine welcome and deep care.
2. Every student must be inspired to learn.
3. Every student must develop a web of significant relationships.
4. Every student must explore questions of meaning and purpose.
Every student must experience genuine welcome and deep care.

PRINCIPLE 1
“Students fear failure and being challenged beyond their limits. They may not have been challenged academically in high school and for the first time they are really experiencing academic rigor. They fear embarrassing their families—being afraid to come home and say, ‘I am not achieving in college right now. I’m struggling.’ They fear talking to a professor because a professor represents an intimidating authority figure. They also resist asking for help because that is perceived as meaning you are not smart. They do not want to go to counseling when they have emotional problems because that’s for people who are weak. The fear of shame is everywhere.”

(David Latimer, City Tech, CUNY)
“He welcomed me in a very warm way that I didn’t really expect from an advisor or any staff member, because high school is kind of non-personal. And the first thing he said was, ‘How are you today?’ And that meant a lot to me because not many people take the time to find out how you are doing.”

(Ivette Perez, City Tech, CUNY)
“Coming to college was a difficult experience for me. There was the just being away from home part. And then there was race. I never felt like I was a student first. I was always Black first, and then a student. For example, during my junior year, I remember walking into class that day after Tamir Rice was killed by police. I was distraught. I walked into class and sat there, and it seemed like no one else was fazed by it. The day went on as usual for other students. It was so surreal to have all of this weight on me because of something that happened, and not feeling that reflected at all by the students and professors around me.”

(Khadijah Seay, Bryn Mawr College)
“Rather than ask why and how so many students college students meet with failure, perhaps it is more useful to consider how students persist in the face of such powerful urges to quit.”

(Cox, 2009, p.42)
Every student must be inspired to learn.

PRINCIPLE 2
THE CLASSROOM IS THE MOST IMPORTANT PLACE TO INSPIRE LEARNING

In a 2018 observational study of teaching in 709 STEM courses at 25 North American universities, researchers observed minimal or no educationally purposeful student-student or student-faculty interaction in 55% of the classes. (Stains et al., 2018)
“My professor made the course interactive in a way that something as boring as rocks become interesting. The passion she had—she wasn’t just giving me information—her subject was something that she loved. And the way that she explained it, for some reason, I wanted to learn everything about rocks. The most important thing is that the class became a community. She had us interact with each other and with the subject. It just came together because of her passion.”

(José Robles, Nevada State College)
“The teachers in our biology department are really interested in active learning, and I found out that type of learning really resonated with me. It’s very collaborative working in small groups and having lots of discussion during lecture. I had one professor in genetics in the fall quarter of my junior year who dedicated so much time to his students and was really clear about expectations and was the most phenomenal teacher I ever had. At the very end of the quarter, I just walked up to him after the last lecture and I said, ‘Thank you so much for a great quarter. Are you accepting undergraduate research students?’”

(Samantha Paskvan, University of Washington)
“Once your students recognize that you care about them, and about where they come from, and about their goals and what they’re trying to accomplish, then you have a strong foundation for teaching and learning.”

(Matthew Smith, California State University Dominguez Hills)
Every student must develop a web of significant relationships.

PRINCIPLE 3
“Part of my vision for Oakton is that every student and employee feels that this is a place where they matter, where they belong, and where they are connected to someone—ideally more than one. Relationships are at the focus of everything we do, and creating inescapable opportunities for engagement is our focus.”

(Joi Smith, Oakton Community College)
“I took out my notebook from when I was in anatomy as a student. I showed her my notebook and talked with her about how I learned—taking notes, reviewing videos, rereading my notes. She seemed to be inspired, and said to me, ‘How about it if I try this?’ And she got a better grade for the next exam!’

(Rosa Espinal, Florida International University)
“Early in Calculus 2, we started getting into really difficult things and I suddenly began having these feelings like I didn’t belong in this class—that my education, what I was trying to achieve, wasn’t possible and my goals were just obscenely farther away than I thought they were…. 

(Joshua Rodriguez, Oakton Community College)
…I went to professor Arco to say that I might have to drop out. He said to me, ‘Joshua, I don’t want you to do the homework tonight. I want you to look up imposter syndrome and read about it. Then come and talk to me.’ I did that, and I learned that it is extraordinarily common among college students. That interaction bolstered my confidence to realize that I’m not alone in this, that everyone has these feelings. I went from contemplating dropping out to getting tutoring help—and then getting an A in the course.”

(Joshua Rodriguez, Oakton Community College)
Every student must explore questions of meaning and purpose.

PRINCIPLE 4
“Deep learning has to be meaningful. Our students are adults. They have to have learning that connects with who they are and who they are becoming as human beings. These students need to ask the big questions of their lives, and they need faculty, staff and peer mentors to help them think through these questions.”

(Gail Mellow, LaGuardia Community College)
“Many of our students haven’t necessarily tapped into the gifts and the skills they already have—their own tenacity, their own intelligence. We can help them understand that they are fully capable—every single one of them—of earning their degrees. We ask: ‘What are the things you’ve worked towards and achieved?’ That is essential to them being able to say and believe, ‘I am good at things, I can commit to things, and I can finish them.’”

(Donna Linderman, ASAP, CUNY)
“Beyond the serious science we’re doing, there's this whole other aspect of caring about each other's lives. The faculty will make the time to ask, ‘How are your classes going?’ ‘What are you thinking about for next year?’ ‘What are you getting involved in outside of the lab?’ ‘Who do you want to be after you graduate?’ And then they would really listen and encourage me, even when I wasn’t sure if I knew what I was doing or where I was going.”

(Samantha Paskvan, University of Washington)
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INSTITUTIONS MUST LEAD

• We need to tell students that relationships are essential to success in (and after) college.
• We need to demystify the “codes and customs” and the process of relationship-building.
• We need to invite everyone on campus to join a culture of mentoring.
• We need to reconsider reward systems and metrics of excellence.
NURTURING A RELATIONSHIP-RICH CULTURE

• “This is part of who we are and what we do. It’s a part of our daily activity. It’s part of the way we show up to work. It’s who we are as a culture.” (Brad Johnson, United States Naval Academy)
• Value both long-term relationships and “mentors of the moment.”
• Relationships are particularly important for those who feel on they are on the margins.
INDIVIDUALS MAKE A DIFFERENCE

- A chancellor builds in time to talk to students on the way to meetings at NC A&T
- An art historian mentors the football team at McDaniel College
- The Faculty Project for Student Persistence at Oakton Community College
- “How are you?”