

Pings, Dings, and How Are You: Quick, Caring Check-Ins that Build Student Support

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As mentors and advisors, we are called to recognize the urgency of building a collaborative support network for students who face challenges in the academic setting. Engaging faculty staff and other key individuals creates a connected team that fosters an environment where students feel empowered, focused, and encouraged to take healthy risks in their learning. This approach contributes to holistic student success and wellbeing. Building a culture of care across departments requires intentional efforts to create a connected network centered on student flourishing. Engaging the entire network is challenging but consistent micro-acknowledgments build connection and nourish the Higher Educational eco-system. Therefore, advisors can foster proactive support and meaningful relationships by threading a shared vision across the student's learning community. A case study exploring how Relational Cultural Theory principles nurture student success through relationships that foster zest, self-worth, clarity, eagerness to engage, and a desire for deeper connection. These relationships nourish mutual empathy, empowerment, and a sense of interconnection. The tools discussed focus on enhancing connection and mutuality within a student's academic network. Proactive actions such as reaching out to professors, arranging casual meet-ups, and building personal connections deepen relationships and foster a sense of belonging within the campus ecosystem. These strategies help center the student's learning while creating a supportive interconnected community where all members feel engaged and valued. Although students may not directly witness the relationship-building within their academic support network, the impact is significant. When advisors and professors align on a shared understanding of the student's needs and communicate with care and consistency, the student feels more supported, less isolated and more connected to their learning. This coordinated care fosters a sense of belonging and mutuality within the network—creating a stronger foundation for the student's success and wellbeing.

Keywords: Relational networks, mutuality, cultures of care, higher education eco-systems

Introduction

As advisors, we are responsible for recognizing the urgency of building a collaborative support network for students who face challenges in the academic setting. Engaging faculty, staff, and other key individuals creates an interconnected team that fosters an environment where students feel they matter, are self-empowered, focused, and encouraged to take healthy risks in their learning (Kezar & Posselt, 2019; Schwartz, 2019). The interconnected experience can also have positive effects on staff and faculty members (Carusetta & Cranton, 2005; Palmer, 2017). Building a student-supportive web, where constituents recognize and acknowledge each other, contributes to a holistic approach to student success and wellbeing. Still, in higher education, students—especially those who are neurodivergent or new to the academic environment—often face systemic barriers when dealing with academic challenges, amid a mix of both positive and negative relational experiences.

Hence, the need for intentional relationship-centered support offers a sustainable and regenerative path forward. Therefore, advisors can play a central role in weaving together a responsive and collaborative web of care that centers the student while nourishing the broader ecosystem of faculty, staff, and peer mentors.

In this case study-inspired format, I will provide an overview of relational cultural theory (RTC) to establish a framework for building cultures of care in student support networks. I will also provide a discussion exploring philosophies and approaches to nourishing an interconnected student-support network experience.

Literature Review

When campuses operate in silos, students can feel lost or disconnected, which in turn diminishes both their academic engagement and sense of belonging (Kezar & Posselt, 2019). While existing cracks and gaps contribute to students' feelings

of confusion and isolation, simultaneously there is a powerful undercurrent of connection—a constellation of individuals who can positively influence a student's sense of belonging and self-worth within the institution. (RCT), especially the concepts of mutual empathy and empowerment, provides a relatable framework that helps us recognize how meaningful engagement with staff and faculty fosters mutual empathy, growth, and empowerment, initially stemming from their responsibility to the shared student. By centering relationships across roles and departments, we foster a culture where students are supported, seen, and feel a sense of mattering.

Simultaneously, fostering a culture of care for student support can energize staff and faculty, enabling them to experience a sense of belonging and mattering. In this section, I will discuss RCT as a framework for fostering connections in Higher Education and what a culture of care means for vitalizing the network.

Relational Cultural Theory

Relational cultural theory (RCT) is a philosophy that acknowledges the impact of power and the ways in which culture influences how people perceive and understand relationships—first originating in the counseling environment between therapist and patient. During these vulnerable and intimate sessions, therapists began to acknowledge the influence the patient had on their growth and development (Miller, 1976; Surrey, 1991). Not just as an effective therapist but also as an ever-evolving human. In Western society, success is often defined through individual merit accomplishments, but this perspective isolates individuals and overlooks the reality that connection serves as an ever-present undercurrent to human flourishing (Jordan, 2010).

So, what does this mean for higher education? Education is a place where curiosity is encouraged, reverberating into healthy skepticism, research, and dialogue among diverse perspectives. However, at least in the United States, there is an imbalance between creating an environment for new knowledge to emerge and bureaucratic demands such as political influence. The tension is an example of two worlds that many educators, staff members, and administrators must navigate: an undercurrent of disconnection and an undercurrent of connection.

Therefore, let us look closely at what RCT has to offer. I will focus on mutuality, encompassing mutual empowerment and empathy, as a generative energy within relationships and the larger support community. Specifically, I aim to demonstrate how mutual empathy and empowerment act as guiding values and beacons in moments of complexity, confusion, and exhaustion.

Remember, if we live in a world of disconnection and connection, then fostering what connection feels like is not at first easy – but it may become easier with practice. Therefore, it is essential to recognize that mutuality is something people strive to build together by lowering ego-induced

boundaries and allowing themselves to engage in a shared experience (Jordan, 1991). Surrey (1991) defined mutuality as “forward movement towards enlarging connection, clarity, vitality, and awareness” (p. 10), recognizing it as an energy within a relationship where empathy emerges.

Therefore, if we can understand a relationship as a living being, then we can center it. By centering the relationships that comprise the network, those who make up the network have a responsibility to engage with one another in the hope that the network remains alive and continues to flourish.

Let us take a step back from the educational environment and consider nature as an example of how those within the network have a responsibility to keep the network thriving. Let us view the network as an ecosystem. Within an ecosystem, like within a forest, there are many independent communities within the larger ecosystem – all serving each other to fuel their own ecosystem and the greater one as well. For instance, in a forest, where large trees blanket the landscape, they act as a canopy for other systems to function. However, trees are not only responsible for supporting others—they must also care for themselves.

Still, since their roots cannot reach one another, they rely on micro-fungi to carry messages between them. In turn, micro-fungi are not solely responsible for this work either. The relationship is mutual: trees provide carbon, while micro-fungi supply essential nutrients, sustaining one another through a growth-fostering relationship. Through this moment of working together, both their ecosystems sustain, adapt, and continue living; together, they breathe out some of what is needed to nourish the entire forest ecosystem (Simard, 2016). This energy exchange is a moment of mutuality emerging through a growth-fostering relationship.

Bringing RCT back into the conversation, scientists observe moments where trees and micro-fungi work together through an interconnected network of energy exchange, mirroring the energy exchange within the higher educational ecosystem. Staff and faculty come together daily. They regularly share knowledge and learn from each other to help their respective departments adapt and thrive. Unfortunately, this is a moment in US history where governmental leadership is influencing a heightened response among university departments – causing the urgent response not just to live but to survive. Now more than ever, there is good reason for departments to center network relationships – more of a reason to nourish the student support ecosystem.

Therefore, if we want to center the student, we must center the relationships that make up the network. Centering the relationships within the network is where mutuality becomes a focal point. In one study, professors of undergraduates were asked, “What does a positive teaching-learning relationship feel like?” While the study focused on the student-professor relationship, a sense of isolation within departments arose in

the interviews (Grosman, 2024). Alternatively, in the case of the student-professor relationship, professors expressed a sense of alignment in their purpose and how they engaged their students. Seeing Students' Humanity and Generativity as Purpose arose as key indicators of what is needed to nourish the relationship.

Additionally, generativity played a significant role in motivating and energizing professors in their work (Grosman, 2024). Mutuality echoed beyond the relationship between professors and students and into the greater educational community. Some participants shared how they took their work into different learning spaces, while others reported that their students carried the professor's purpose forward by pursuing master's programs aligned with the curriculum's underlying messages of empathy. Similar studies also concluded that students carry forward the mutuality that echoes beyond the relationship (Schwartz & Holloway, 2012 & 2014). The generativity of positive connection was evident in master's students who felt connected to their professors; even after the formal partnership ended, these students remained energized and continued to progress in their work. In response, professors also felt energized and learned from the students, which they then applied in their succeeding student-professor relationships (Schwartz, 2009). While these experiences stem from the student-professor relationship, they exemplify how relationships across departments can nourish one another and the greater ecosystem we call education.

Methodology: Case Study

This scenario, based on the first-year experiences of several students and embodied in a composite student named Micah (they/them), reflects my efforts to weave a supportive web of care where mutuality nourishes everyone involved. It is Micah's first week of the second quarter in the first year of college. They come to my office for our weekly academic coaching meeting. My role is to support students in navigating their college experience. My primary responsibility as an academic coach is to create a space where students with a neurodiversity diagnosis can learn, think, and problem-solve aloud about their college experiences. That includes helping them develop their guardrails, teaching executive functioning skills, and learning how to navigate social and bureaucratic systems. As Micah walks in, I see their hands fidgeting, and their face is pale like they had seen a ghost. Before they can sit down, I say, "Come with me; we'll meet another team member." Before their arrival, I emailed Micah asking if they were comfortable with us holding our meeting with their academic counselor so we could discuss their low GPA and how they can return to good academic standing. Micah finished their first quarter of college with a .032 GPA. With such a low score, my colleagues and I discussed typical assumptions for their low performance: ranging from Micah possibly not attending class

to focusing on their social life over their studies. The irony for Micah is that they participated in every class, studied for every quiz, and completed most of their assignments. Micah is also diagnosed with ADHD and General Anxiety Disorder, which for them meant perseverating and hyper-focusing on one task, causing a hyperfocus and negatively affecting their time management.

Asking for help was not easy for Micah either. As they had shared, they often did not realize they needed help until it was too late. All this to say, my role with Micah in their second quarter shifted. I continued to support them through one-on-one academic counseling and executive coaching while also becoming proactively engaged in nurturing their support network. Proactively engaging the support network meant working with their academic advisor quietly in the background before we met with Micah to ensure we agreed on how to work with them, pinging their professors through intercampus communication platforms, like Inspire, when I noticed the grades were low to see if Micah were willing to meet with them, and sending intentional emails to professors sharing how Micah was positively experiencing an assignment from their classes.

Findings

A few positive outcomes emerged from this experience. By the end of the second quarter, Micah was back in healthy academic standing. They said they appreciated working with me and the academic advisor simultaneously because they felt supported and less stressed by running from one office to the next for separate meetings. They also identified how they felt successful and had a sense of control by using a daily planner, where they wrote down weekly assignments and could see a month at a time for managing long-term projects. They became more aware of when they began feeling overwhelmed and expressed it by asking for help and signing up for tutors.

Additionally, by the end of the second quarter, they applied and were accepted for the leadership program held in my office. Their responsibilities would entail developing programming and mentoring first-years for the following year. They were proud and confident and felt they mattered to their professors.

As for the network, Micah was unaware that I was quietly working to engage the people connected to them—and there was no need for them to know. The leading professors I engaged also expressed a sense of zest from the experience of working more closely with Micah. In an intimate meeting by a fireplace nook in the library, the professors and I expressed that we felt more connected to Micah and each other as educators. They appreciated the touchpoints, the emails, and the random acknowledgments of how Micah responded positively to their assignments. I also felt more willing to continue to engage the professors for future purposes. I saw them as resources and allies in creating positive environments for students.

In that moment, the professors and I embodied mutual empathy and empowerment. There was an informality in our time together. It was as though humans, who momentarily stepped out of their roles, came together to reflect on what feels aligned as educators and relished the shared experience of feeling connected within the greater higher educational ecosystem.

Discussion

In today's educational landscape, staff and faculty are responsible for thinking beyond their time with students and recognizing their role in nurturing a supportive student network, especially when students face challenges. This approach fosters an environment where students can thrive, focusing on academic achievement and their overall wellbeing. However, thinking beyond the one-on-one time with students is not always easy.

With the demands of each person's role can come exhaustion and isolation. Therefore, proactive strategies are essential for fostering connections within the academic network, thereby benefiting the community's overall health. However, the question is, how do you nourish a supportive student network without exhausting yourself in the process?

A critical strategy in this collaboration is the use of micro-acknowledgments. These small gestures of acknowledgment—such as expressing gratitude through a simple text message—help build strong relationships and foster a sense of belonging among students, faculty, and staff. Small actions — such as pinging professors, organizing group staff meetings with students, and fostering stronger relationships between professors and staff — serve as nutrients in the network, helping to create a more inclusive campus community. These initiatives also help center the student's learning experience and ensure they feel valued and supported while simultaneously nurturing a sense of connection among the other members of a student's team.

Additionally, anyone within the network has the power to foster these connections. As noted in early works by Wheatley and Frieze (2006), building communities of practice where staff and faculty are committed to one another to support, listen, and learn fosters a sense of community that enables them to lean into and explore how to support each other and the students. Like in nature's ecosystems, communities of practice encourage people to participate for their own needs of support but also to serve the needs of others. While students may not always see the behind-the-scenes work of relationship-building, communities of practice can influence their sense of belonging and mattering. Moreover, advisors and faculty, acknowledging that they operate within the same network, foster a caring atmosphere that reduces feelings of isolation and enhances the learning experience. Mutual empowerment and empathy emerge in communities of practice, refueling the connective tissue that binds them.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by centering relationships within the network, professors and staff can feel more connected to one another and their shared students. Through an RCT lens that emphasizes mutuality and interconnection, they have the power to create a dynamic and caring campus culture where students experience a sense of belonging and faculty and staff feel valued and that they matter.

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