An Ethic of Care in Higher Education: Well-Being and Learning

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Abstract

At the heart of commitments to student success is a progressive concept of the relationship between students and institutions of higher education that embraces shared responsibility for the quality and outcomes of learning—and, therefore, for students’ ability, capacity, and readiness to learn. Since learning is a complex activity of the whole person, and well-being—broadly defined—is a major determinant of students’ readiness to learn, advancing student success requires attention to students as whole people, and to their individual and collective well-being. Attention to students as whole people, a shared responsibility for learning, and responsiveness to students’ well-being, taken together, reflect the existence and influence of an underlying ethic of care.

Institutions and Persons

We too easily lapse uncritically into thinking of institutions of higher education—or, for that matter, of institutions of any kind—as mechanical things, machines, or objects; we lose our essential awareness that institutions and their organizational elements (e.g., schools, divisions, sectors, departments, programs) are structured communities of people. “The administration,” for example, is not some robot or technology; it is a group of human beings, large or small, that has responsibility for certain management tasks and decisions. By saying “the administration,” we intentionally (though thoughtlessly) transform our perception and understanding of those people from a group of living, real human beings into a thing—removing, in the process, the elements of humanity that pertain to the people involved. This use of impersonal organizational terms allows us to make claims against those people as “the administration,” without considering their fundamental human characteristics and feelings. Sometimes we use “students,” or “the students,” in the same way; “the students,” like “the administration,” become a mass of something, losing not only their individuality but also their humanness in the translation. Consideration of relationships between “the students” and “the administration” (or “the college,” or “the university”) is then fraught with the dual dangers of depersonalization and dehumanization.

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But institutions are only collected persons, brought together in a certain form of social order, or community, with a set of governing assumptions; those assumptions typically include purpose, responsibilities, scope of authority and power, particular methods and practices specific to purposes and responsibilities, and sometimes accountability for processes and outcomes. Colleges and universities as institutions of higher education bring together several intersecting, and sometimes (but not always) collaborative, communities: students, faculty, staff (including administrators), trustees, and alumni. These communities know and work with each other in various ways; the theoretical common purpose of their being together is defined by the mission of the whole institution that they comprise. Arguments about competing priorities aside, the core elements of that mission—the reason that communities of students, faculty, and staff, especially, know and work with one another—is learning. Colleges and universities are, after all, educational institutions. As chartered institutions operating with the public’s trust, they establish relationships among collections of human beings in order to achieve an educational purpose.

The Relationship Between Students and Institutions of Higher Education

Human beings and their brains are inherently social; one of the primary conclusions of neuroscience is that we are “hard wired” for connections, social communities, and (importantly) empathy. We are by nature relational, responsive creatures; absent that impulse, the human race would have vanished as an evolutionary accident. In being relational and social, we become connected; connections and communities bring us into relation with one another and make us interdependent. It is the absence of those characteristics in some others that often puzzles and concerns us; we grow suspicious of “loners,” develop imaginative fantasies about the lives of hermetic colleagues and neighbors, and question, even as we respect them, the “walls” or “shields” put up by people who won’t “let us in.” The concepts, conditions, and diagnoses of sociopathy define the farthest extremity of these perceptions and concerns; sociopaths, in general, do not have the same relational, responsive, and empathic features of most human beings.

The relationship between a person—a student, say—and an institution (“the administration,” or “the college”) is not understood as and does not function as one of equals, especially when the institution is seen as a not-human mechanism, or “thing.” That relationship, if acknowledged at all, is usually defined through rules, traditions, and customs, not by mutual understanding, responsiveness, or empathy. Institutions leave to individual members of the staff or faculty any responsibility for understanding, responsiveness, or empathy in their relationships with students. Institutions may cluster or aggregate those individuals in certain ways, assigning to those clusters responsibility for “students;” we are accustomed to knowing those clusters as student life or student affairs. But with rare exceptions, any actual relationship of understanding, responsiveness, and empathy occurs between individuals—a student with another person. Among the great strengths of the collections of persons that we call colleges and universities is the presence in them of people, whether staff or faculty, who, as people, act responsively and empathically toward students.

The good news about that is self-evident; many people who are members of the staff or faculty make and sustain responsive, empathic relationships with students. The bad news is that their doing so may be seen as an exemption of the institution’s larger obligation as a collection of persons to sustain responsive, empathic relationships with students as well. That bad news is far worse in many colleges and universities today; limited resources and other priorities (let us be honest: other priorities, from auxiliary enterprises to glorious facilities, are at least as important as limited resources) have created negatively
reinforcing conditions, such as excessive dependence on contingent faculty and reductions in student support services, which undermine students’ ability to form relationships with individual members of the faculty and staff.

Is it morally and ethically acceptable for institutions to assume that the possibility of responsive, empathic relationships between individual members of the faculty or staff and students relieves them of any human obligation to students as individuals or as a community? The assumptions and consequences of such commitments as “engaged learning” and “student success” demand that the answer is “no.” No college or university can at once claim to value and act according to principles of engagement and student success while neglecting students as whole human persons and without accepting certain obligations and accountability in relation to those persons. Being in relation to students recognizes connection, acknowledges interdependence, and creates ethical requirements. Other formulations of a relationship with students that do not imply shared responsibility as student success does may or may not allow different ethical requirements. An institution of higher education that sees itself as the possessor of certain intellectual assets that students enroll to use, with no implication of any responsibility on the institution’s part to ensure that the assets are used effectively and well, may claim not to have obligations to students as persons; in doing so, it also abjures any claim on the quality of learning or student success. Institutions that understand students primarily as consumers may claim no responsibility beyond delivering what students paid for according to the terms and conditions of enrollment (or purchase). In neither case could those institutions justly and defensibly espouse a mission of learning, however.

**Institutions In Relation With Students: Implications and Consequences of an Ethic of Care**

Being in relation creates particular human consequences; those consequences have been articulated among ethicists and philosophers in different ways (Beck, 1992; Gilligan, 1982; Held, 2005; Tronto, 1994), but the primary themes are these:

- paying attention; noticing with empathy others and their circumstances;
- accepting responsibility to act on what is noticed, which recognizes human connectedness and interdependence;
- assuring ability, capacity, and competency—that is, being prepared to respond, and respond effectively; and
- responding, which accepts the principle of differential vulnerability (a richer concept than simple power differentials; it holds that not everyone is able to respond in the same ways) and does not require reciprocity (actions taken on behalf of another do not require equal or complementary actions in return).

Taken together, those principles define an ethic of care in human relationships; regardless of the degree to which any human being rationalizes, describes, or articulates them, they are in general the ways in which caring individuals behave ethically toward others. An ethic of care, whatever it is called and however it is named or recognized, is central to responsive, empathic relationships and to the functioning of most human communities.
In our society, such an ethic of care in relation to others is often described and frequently dismissed as a “soft” factor. “Soft skills” such as working well with and understanding others and demonstrating collegiality, while often valued, may be seen as less important than intellectual or technical abilities; and in some settings, occupations and roles are seen as weaknesses. An analysis of an ethic of care in relation to cultural assumptions about gender is beyond the scope and purpose of this article (Tronto, 1987), but the simple observation that caring is often seen as a feminine or female trait may certainly undermine the willingness of some institutions that embrace a more stereotypically masculine or male culture to value (beyond words in marketing or positioning statements), endorse, and reward it. Social and cultural progress notwithstanding, transgressions of accepted gender roles remain challenging in many institutions, including most institutions of higher education.

Those difficulties acknowledged, it remains true that a commitment to student engagement and success demands an ethic of care toward students that embraces the themes described above. Colleges and universities that want students to succeed must share responsibility for their achievement of success and must take account of students as people who are learning. In today’s discourse, however, student success is too readily equated with completion or graduation; success cannot usefully be defined so mechanistically. Students are successful when they achieve what they came to college for—learning; learning is, again, the reason for the existence of institutions of higher education. Learning and completion are not the same thing; unfortunately, completion and graduation are possible without sufficient learning, and robust learning can occur without completion. The “both/and” condition is most desirable; students should learn and graduate.

Learning is necessary to student success regardless of any other consideration; that learning should include the forms, categories, and outcomes of learning experiences that are often formulated and described as desired student learning outcomes, including cognitive, developmental, civic, and workplace competencies. Students who only acquire content knowledge but did not develop as whole people do not achieve student success because they do not accomplish the full spectrum of learning that the institution intends. Students who fulfill academic requirements and graduate without learning “soft skills” will frustrate their future employers and colleagues. Students whose experience in higher education included no participation in activities, shared living, leadership opportunities, recreation or athletics, or governance will be poorly prepared for citizenship, civic engagement, and lively participation in a democracy. The idea of student success is of the learning and development of a whole, integrated person. An institutional ethic of care supports, and indeed is essential to, the achievement of that idea.

**Well-Being and Student Success**

The strong implication of an ethic of care between colleges and universities and students is that the institution in its policies, practices, and actions cares about students and their success; this understanding of their relationship with students obligates institutions to notice and attend to factors that influence students’ ability to be successful—which means factors that influence their ability to learn. Certain of those factors may be innate characteristics not subject to the influence of circumstances; but many supposedly innate features, such as intelligence and cognitive capacity, are not as fixed and are instead more susceptible to positive or negative change depending on characteristics of the learning environment than usual metrics and measurements would suggest. Other factors are external or imposed limitations and constraints, such as access to necessary technology or learning resources. But many influences on ability to learn—what is often called readiness to learn in both research and applied literature—can be understood within the broad formulation...
of well-being, which is a quality of health, wholeness, resiliency, and flourishing that is experienced and defined beyond any current state of personal, academic, professional, occupational, or social distress, illness, or injury.

Our common lived experience of these influences on readiness to learn includes any number of frequent examples: the quantity and quality of sleep; levels of, and our ability to manage, stress; short-term or chronic physical or mental illness; alcohol and other drug use or abuse and its consequences; adaptive challenges, such as grief, homesickness, cultural immersion, and jet lag; social and relationship problems; and the quality of our thinking, learning, and working environments. Ultimately, any student’s level and experience of well-being may be the final common pathway through which even external challenges are experienced; not having sufficient access to technology or the resources (money, time, and transportation) to take advantage of the academic and personal support services available from an institution may manifest as frustration, distraction, and stress.

There have been, and are, other ways of expressing the holistic quality that we call well-being: health (as long as that term is not limited to medical concerns), wholeness, wellness, flourishing, and so on. Each of them attempts to describe the expansive scope of what its terminology is meant to convey, with multiple dimensions or categories; each of them also recognizes that the determinants of any and all of those dimensions and categories are multiple. Time invested in defending or attacking any way of describing or naming the same general holistic quality that we are here calling well-being, including well-being itself, is lost with little purpose—and serves no one’s well-being. Suffice to say that well-being, like other alternate terms, describes a holistic quality that is both richly desired and precious, though hard to describe adequately given the constraints of language and culture. At its core is human dignity, and its greatest requirement is for justice; dignity, justice, and well-being are essential to human flourishing and sustainability.

Well-being is necessary for higher learning; the mind (which is, notably, part of the whole student) must be free of constraints to be ready to learn. Those constraints may be individual and personal or systematic and structural; either way, they demand the notice of the institution, call upon the institution’s responsibility, create reasonable expectations for competent action, and do not (and should not) require reciprocity from students. The requirements of an ethic of care blend the responsive, empathic elements of ethical human relationships with the institution’s mission-specific responsibility for student learning and success; they recognize the impact of well-being on students’ engagement, readiness to learn, capacity for learning, and success in achieving learning outcomes. Certainly an institution’s motives for exhibiting and acting according to an ethic of care for students may be complex; truly ethical principles may be involved, and even be primary, but other considerations, such as competition and rankings; attempts to better satisfy students and parents as consumers; accreditation requirements; and federal guidelines related to persistence and completion, may apply equally. Regardless, allegiance to the goal of student success has steered many colleges and universities toward behaviors that approximate the application of an ethic of care.

Commitments to supporting student learning and success are now common in both higher education professional organizations and individual institutions, and in both academic and student affairs; those commitments are linked with increasing frequency to particular curricular changes and to personal and academic support services intended to make learning and success more likely. A common example that is more often achieved on paper than in practice is the integration, coupling, or “tight coupling” of learning experiences inside and outside the classroom; the good intention beneath such efforts grows from the realization that students learn always and everywhere, and that all of the major desired student learning outcomes are achieved when they are, through many different learning experiences that occur across enroll-
ment and throughout the college experience. In progressive institutions, integrating and coupling learning experiences also entails recognizing the educational roles and purposes of staff, as well as faculty. On the leading edge of institutional change, faculty and student affairs professionals increasingly understand each other as collaborative partners in student learning. No matter where any college or university falls along the spectrum of institutional change on those points, commitments to student learning and success call not just for curricular and organizational change, but also for diligent attention to students’ well-being.

**Noticing and Responding to Challenges to Students’ Well-Being**

An ethic of care requires that colleges and universities recognize, acknowledge, and manage or overcome individual, community, and systematic challenges and barriers to students’ well-being. In any institution that works toward student success, policies, programs, services, and practices must be established to support the preparedness of students as learners; this obligation must be understood, accepted, and discharged at a systemic and institutional level, as opposed to being addressed randomly through purely personal and individual commitments and actions. A concerned faculty member or a faculty composed exclusively of concerned members, like a concerned dean of students or a whole student affairs division composed exclusively of concerned staff, is not enough; the institution as an institution must notice and act.

What must be noticed? What conditions, circumstances, or situations reflect or influence students’ well-being? To expand on a brief list given earlier, some are mental and behavioral health challenges—what might be called personal and social dysfunctions or disorders, including anxiety, depression, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, interpersonal violence or abuse, excessive stress, alcohol and other drug or substance abuse and its consequences, and poor or insufficient sleep. Others are short-term, recurrent, or chronic physical health problems, from protracted upper respiratory infections to asthma or diabetes. Some are life conditions that affect students’ ability to think, sleep, reflect, write, or wonder, from poverty or financial stress to challenges related to adaptation, family problems, work responsibilities that compete for time, and the quality of their living environment. What they have in common is their negative influence on learning; it is both their existence and their influence that must be noticed.

Depression is the best-studied example. Across the spectrum of degrees and types of depression, depression is both a cause of suffering (and, therefore, a human problem, demanding human notice and care) and a learning disorder (and, therefore, a mission-centered problem, demanding institutional notice and care). Students who are depressed learn less well than others; research in cognitive psychology and the neurosciences confirms that the flatness in affect and interaction so often observed among students and others who are depressed is matched by restraint in the activation of brain functions required for learning, including the formation of new memories. Correlative studies show that depression, like anxiety and mixed anxiety and depression, influences the outcomes of attempts to learn as well; retention and grade point averages are negatively affected among students with those conditions (Eisenberg, Golbestein, & Hunt, 2009). Emily Dickinson (1998), the mid-nineteenth century New England poet, the “belle of Amherst,” articulately described this effect—without ever mentioning depression or learning, and without the benefits of cognitive research methods and functional magnetic resonance imaging scans—in her poem that begins “I felt a funeral, in my Brain.” In terse words, Dickinson describes her mind “going numb” and a “plan in Reason” breaking; ultimately, she “Finished knowing—then” (p. 153).

How, indeed, can students learn when they “feel a funeral in [their] brain”? When a “plan in reason” breaks? That is the point at which they “finish knowing” or learning. Depression and other conditions or
circumstances that undermine students’ ability to learn become mission-centered institutional problems when colleges and universities share responsibility for students’ learning and success.

**An Institutional Ethic of Care**

How can colleges and universities apply an ethic of care to promote readiness to learn, reduce, or eliminate barriers to learning, and strengthen the quality, quantity, and outcomes of student learning? What if our understanding of the importance of supporting student learning and success was thoroughly and powerfully reflected in the structure, organization, and curricula of colleges and universities? What if we attended to the influence of well-being on learning in the way we organize our programs—and our institutions? What if we used all institutional resources in the education and preparation of the whole student? What if we worked from an ethic of care? What must be done?

We would…

- Make learning the primary touchstone for institutional decision-making. Assess all questions of resource allocation, planning priorities, institutional strategy, and project or activity selection based on the projected effects of those decisions on the quality and quantity of learning and on their probable impact on the potential for achieving and sustaining a healthy campus community and strong learning environment.

- Through diligent observation and research, develop a nuanced understanding of the most important, powerful, and influential factors that promote or impair learning among our own students, looking widely at their lives. Having identified and prioritized those factors, create strategies for intervening effectively wherever and whenever possible to strengthen students and their communities; raise the standards for “wherever possible” to mean more than “if convenient.”

- Establish holistic student learning and developmental outcomes, ensure that learning experiences inside and outside the classroom address those outcomes, and thoughtfully and purposefully integrate learning experiences of all kinds to promote both academic achievement and student success.

- Provide high-quality, accredited health and mental health services, ensuring equal access for all students regardless of insurance status and ability to pay. But not all students who face psychological barriers to learning will self-identify and seek services or treatment; many will not—so assume those students and their needs exist within the community and devote resources and attention to noticing and responding to them.

- Accept the need for transformative change in the ways in which we address challenges to effective learning—moving from traditional, responsive services for students who are identified by themselves or others as having dysfunctions or problems affecting the quality of their learning to a community-based approach to ensuring the creation and sustainability of a strong campus culture that supports flourishing at both individual and community levels. Such acceptance means a radical commitment to an ecological approach to ensuring student and campus well-being.

Making learning—and the well-being and success of learners—the top priority for institutions of higher education will require significant, nonincremental, changes in policies and practices throughout...
the academy, with fundamental changes in our academic, social, and campus cultures. Student success, properly understood, requires cultural change, using cultural and social tools and political acumen, and serious engagement with students as whole, integrated human beings. It will not be efficient, fast, or cheap. First among those changes and new commitments should be the intentional creation, robust application, and celebration of an ethic of care. Noticing alone is not enough; we must take responsibility, ensure our competency and capacity, and respond without any assumption or expectation of reciprocity from students.

References


