

Student Success and Retention: What’s Educational Development Got to Do With It?

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Abstract

When faculty adapt their teaching and learning methods to match student needs, students succeed. Centers for Teaching and Learning (CTLs) guide and support faculty to meet the evolving student needs. Recognizing that pedagogical changes can be difficult, CTLs approach this work through relationship-rich interactions with instructors, staff and peers.

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Students are the heart and soul of higher education (HE). Regardless of its specific size or constitution, each campus is in the business of student success. The 2024 POD Network Conference showcased educational development research and outlined ways CTLs support instructors to implement innovative teaching and learning methods that match the complex and unique lives of today’s students. Instructors equipped with tools to create positive and effective learning experiences are capable of fostering student success and ensuring retention.

Who are today’s university students?

An important thread at the conference was examining and understanding the needs of today’s HE students, who vary in multiple ways from students of past generations. Consider the following student characteristics:

- **Post-Pandemic** - Post-pandemic students enter classrooms with uneven exposure to foundational knowledge and [increased anxiety](#) surrounding health, learning, and risk-taking. These traits impact students’ capacity to navigate challenging moments in learning. Notably, these challenges disproportionately affect marginalized students due to social and economic constraints during the pandemic (Mumpower, Rohrbacher, and Caulkins, 2024).
- **First-Gen Students** - [Prior to 2010](#), more than two-thirds of students pursuing an undergraduate degree had at least one parent holding a college degree. Today, [Fifty-six percent](#) of undergraduate students are from households where *neither*

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parent holds a bachelor's degree (Mitchell, 2024).

- **Shifts in Ethnicity** - [In the 20 year span from 2002 to 2022](#), the number of Hispanic students nearly doubled (from 11.3 to 20.5 percent) and the proportion of undergraduate students who identify as white decreased by almost 10%. In this same time period, the proportion of international students in universities grew from 1.9 percent to 2.5 percent.
- **Neurodiversity and Disability** - As social attitudes shift, stigmas diminish, and legal frameworks evolve (e.g. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act), students with disabilities and neurodivergent traits are more openly pursuing higher education. According to the National College Health Assessment (2023, p. 88), about 30% of students indicated discussing neurodevelopmental issues with a healthcare provider.
- **Non-Traditional Students** - Today's students include a higher proportion of [students](#) over 24 years old, previously labeled as "non-traditional." Students who delayed initial enrollment in college or are returning for additional credentials often attend school, part-time or full-time, while working and often supporting dependents.
- **Intersectionality** - Each of these specific characteristics can co-occur and exist with other intersecting identity, cultural, and experiential student characteristics. Each

additional characteristic or identity impacts students and can have a compounding impact on their learning ([Pliner, Iuzzini, and Banks](#), 2011; Sillman and Brinkman, 2024).

In short, multiple POD sessions outlined ways students enter universities, unique characteristics of today's students—both strengths and challenges—and barriers students may encounter. These layered student characteristics are associated with decreased knowledge of implicit scripts of college (e.g. can I ask for an extension? Is it important to do an internship? Why would I want to attend office hours?). Advanced technology trends – especially AI, ever-present media, and the sheer volume of information available – impact student learning. The changes in student populations and societal trends have resulted in a shift away from traditional instructor-centered approaches to dynamic and inclusive teaching and learning models. These models emphasize what students “learn” over what instructors “teach” (Atibuni, 2022; Barr & Tagg, 1995; [Bass](#), 2022; [Fear et. al, 2003](#)), prioritizing varied and unique learner experiences. Instructors who are supported in the use of inclusive, evidence-based teaching methods create teaching and learning spaces that acknowledge the diverse strengths and challenges of today's students and reduce barriers to their learning.

How do CTLs contribute to student success through relationship-rich education?

Throughout the POD Network Conference, there was a strong emphasis on how educational developers foster a sense of belonging and community across the institution, and most importantly, within the classroom. As HE faces demographic, cultural, and contextual shifts, most institutions have implemented strategic initiatives to increase student retention and decrease DFW (Drop, Fail, Withdraw) rates (Gillespie and Ervin, 2024). "Relationship-rich education" (Felten & Lambert, 2020), as named in the introductory paper of this issue, was repeated at the conference as a framework with crucial variables impacting student success and retention. Below, the four guiding principles of relationship-rich education frame CTL's work with student success and institutional priorities.

CTLs equip instructors to provide a genuine welcome and deep care

Students need to feel valued as their unique, whole selves and confident that others care about them to engage in courses and make connections within the campus. While all instructors, staff, and other student success collaborators play a role in fostering a space of welcome and care. CTLs have a unique position to establish this relationship-rich foundation through their instructor support.

At the POD Network Conference, many student-focused sessions mentioned belonging, equity, and inclusion. Some sessions emphasized relational frameworks for specific disciplines and

affinity groups such as STEM students, international students, or neurodiverse students; other sessions focused on fostering belonging and inclusivity on campus at large (Kotre, G. H, Dewsbury, B., and A. Caines, 2024; Kraft, et. al, 2024; Davis, Gray, Rzeszutek, 2024; Mitchell, 2024; Walker, et. al, 2024).

Educational developers model intentional relationship-rich connections with instructors and units, providing opportunities to express welcome, care, and support for each instructor, modeling the care instructors are asked to use with their students. These relationship-rich connections often open faculty to learning about and experimenting with course design, teaching strategies, and assessment practices through an informed, research-based lens.

CTLs inspire learning through relationships

Relationships are powerful for inspiring students to learn and engage as they grow academically and personally (Felten & Lambert, 2020). A key way in which CTLs expand student-faculty relationships is by promoting [*Universal Design for Learning \(UDL\)*](#). Tobin, Nave, Pusater, and Tobin's session, "Educational Development Strategies with Universal Design for Learning," explained the updated UDL Framework with its shift in focus from instructor behaviors to developing learner agency. Several POD sessions explored "students as partners" models where faculty co-create learning experiences and teaching changes with students, which leads to meaningful relationships between student "partner" and instructor and meaningful changes in teaching and learning (Best et. al, 2024;

Franklin, 2024; McCloy et. al, 2024; Nugent and Belanger, 2024).

Educational developers help instructors design course structures and use pedagogical methods that guide students and sustain their inspiration for learning. For example, in the research-supported [Transparency in Learning and Teaching \(TILT\) Framework](#), instructors unambiguously state the purpose of the learning activity and how to be successful, which inspires students by making learning purposeful and the learning process clear (Gillespie and Ervin, 2024; Tobin, et al, 2024).

CTLs helps develop webs of significant relationships

Navigating the unknowns of academia alone—from registering for classes to understanding where to seek help should a conflict or concern arise—can lead to feelings of uncertainty and isolation for current and potential students. Students who do not form relationships with others struggle to access the support they need and consequently find less value in their degree (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Gordon, 2024).

In many institutions, CTLs provide support to foster relationships with and among graduate students as future faculty. Educational developers offer TA orientations, mentoring, and assistance as graduate students juggle multiple responsibilities and navigate the teaching-related job market. Many graduate student-focused sessions at POD, highlighted the impact of these experiences on graduate students' passion for teaching, and the potential to establish meaningful connections with

other students and interdisciplinary mentors that persist beyond their university experience (Beydler, Samuel, and Sebastian, 2024; Habtemichael, 2024; Minonne and Ajlen, 2024).

CTLs attend to students' questions of meaning and purpose

Students need relationships that not only support their education journey but also challenge them to explore important questions about their identities, career trajectories, and societal roles—issues of meaning and purpose (Siliman and Brinkman, 2024). Recognizing that learning happens when students are challenged, but feel safe—i.e. the learning zone ([Senniger, 2000](#))—educational developers help faculty create classes where students can expand their worldview and utilize skills they learn in the course. CTLs equip faculty to experiment with emerging developments related to AI in education, increase acceptance of nontraditional submissions (video responses, voice threads, photo essays, blog posts), and experiment with other innovative teaching strategies so that students have many opportunities to make meaning of the world around them (Harrington et. al, 2024).

Conclusion

As institutions navigate how to continue supporting student success amid challenges and changes in HE and culture, content from the POD Network Conference underscores CTLs as a vital institutional resource for fostering student-centered, relationship-rich teaching and learning practices. These practices directly support

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students' trust in their own capacity and belief in the value of higher education. By leveraging the knowledge and outreach of their CTLs, institutions invest in the success and retention of their students.

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