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## **The need to matter and belong: Leadership lessons from the post-secondary student pandemic experience**

**Ivan Joseph<sup>1</sup>**

**O**ne moment in the pandemic that is etched in my mind, and that shifted my perspective on the student experience in a permanent way, came when I witnessed what students, friends and families went through in the spring of 2020.

For university graduates and their friends, families and communities, it was supposed to be a time of celebration. A time for rituals and rites of passage. A time for convocations and degrees conferred. A time to come together and remember and make meaning. A time for barbecues, picnics, drums, dancing, music and reflections.

Instead, as students moved off campus in March and then moved through the virtual ceremonies and gatherings in June, what stood out most of all in the images and posts on social media and interactions with students on video conferences was sorrow. What was supposed to be a celebration was more like a funeral – a time of mourning. And the absence of in-person connection made it difficult to genuinely grieve what was lost. It was heartbreaking.

The experience was a poignant reminder of one of my long-held beliefs that were reinforced in the pandemic: human beings are social creatures who thrive and make meaning together – in groups and in person.

### **My story: The evolution of a belief in connection and community**

I began learning about the importance of community in 1970 when, soon after my birth, my parents emigrated to Canada from our native Guyana in search of opportunities for our family. Remaining behind, my older sister and I were raised by our grandmother and the local community, which functioned as an extended family. I have no memories of that time, but through stories, I've heard over the years I know it was a loving and welcoming beginning.

When I was five, my sister and I flew to Toronto to join our parents. We lived at Jane and Finch in the north end of Toronto, a high-density neighbourhood marked by underrepresented populations struggling to get by. There was an evident connection between everyone in our community. People looked out for each other. As with most immigrants or anyone on the fringes of society, there was also a strong sense of alienation and disconnection.

As one example, my father was an accomplished and experienced soil scientist in Guyana. After arriving in Canada, he worked his way through programs at the Nova Scotia Agricultural College and McGill University in hopes of securing professional employment here. When it came time to apply for jobs, he could not find employment in his field. The stark reality of the professional immigrant experience was reflected in the stack of rejection letters he has kept in a drawer to this day.

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Eventually, he took a job selling encyclopedias door to door at night and working as a hired hand on a farm in King Township. For years, he hitchhiked north every morning before dawn. In time, when our family moved to live on the farm, I worked the farm myself, growing up side-by-side with the children of the white farm owner who employed us and whose last name was, believe it or not, Goodwill.

Farming is an inherently communal activity. Toiling to get the cows milked and the chores complete, braving the elements and racing time, brings people together. Of all the formative experiences that shaped me, those years spent working the farm were among the most saturated in meaning and purpose I can remember.

During high school, athletics was my passion and salvation. It gave me a sense of identity and a spirit of belonging among my friends. Yet, high school was also a time when my socioeconomic status and race began to register for me. I was the kid carrying his gym clothes in a plastic shopping bag. And, as one of the few Black teens in all of King Township, I was also the kid being pulled in by mall security because of my colour. As time passed, I also began to have experiences like getting pulled over by the police to be questioned about the car I was driving. As any Black adult will tell you, those moments create a deep sense of exclusion.

After high school, I enrolled at Laurentian University in Sudbury where, lacking community and structure, my life unravelled. By the end of the first semester, weighed down by a profound sense of isolation and separateness, I was forced to withdraw. I spent the second semester working at a fast food outlet instead of being a student, which filled me with so much shame I didn't tell my parents about it until I was 39. Later that year, I reached out to a college recruiter I met during Grade 13 when he offered me an athletic scholarship to attend a small college in Lamoni, Iowa called Graceland. He and an admissions officer agreed to meet with me, talked through what had transpired in my first year, and gave me a second chance.

At Graceland, inspired by their faith in me and energized by a renewed sense of belonging, I excelled academically, going on to captain the soccer team and become president of a residence hall and an active member of the student community. Though being Black on Graceland's all-white campus made me a raisin in a sugar bowl, my sense of self and community blossomed so much that I stayed on after graduation and began a career in post-secondary education, working full time as a soccer coach and residence life staff while pursuing graduate degrees through part-time study that eventually lead me to become an assistant professor.

Through my graduate work, I laid the theoretical foundation for my approach to student affairs, learning about concepts like Albert Bandura's social learning theory and the impact cohesion has on group success. Using my day jobs as a living laboratory, I applied my learning to deepen my understanding of how people thrive. And the success of the students in my care, which included the men's soccer team winning Graceland's first-ever national championship, illustrated time and again that individual and collective success lies in connection.

In those early years, my theoretical growth was supplemented by transformative on-the-job learning when one of my mentors taught me what he called "The Ministry of Presence." It was the premise that when leading and nurturing young people – or anyone for that matter – the best approach was to create a sense of belonging by being close by and

present. That was my first indication that student affairs is a form of pastoral care, a perspective that has been with me ever since.

Given that Graceland had a student population of roughly 1,000, it was tempting to overlook the fact that a small campus community creates many opportunities to ensure students feel like they matter and belong. When I became Athletic Director at Ryerson University in downtown Toronto, it was striking how much creativity and determination would be needed to create a widespread spirit of belonging on campus. Ryerson has close to 40,000 students, and the other two Canadian universities where I have held senior student affairs leadership roles since then have close to 20,000 students. As such, my work for almost two decades has been focused on helping large institutions create a feeling of community and connection on campus.

This work is interesting and challenging. On the one hand, you have student development theorists and practitioners like me whose purpose is to support, advocate for and protect students. On the other hand, you have leaders from other areas of the university, including professors, who have backgrounds and priorities that may not be as anchored in the student experience. In my partnership with other institutional leaders, I often spend a fair amount of my time striving to ensure that institutional objectives, mechanisms and priorities don't supersede or undermine the student experience.

In October 2020, in the middle of the pandemic response, I joined Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo, Ontario as the new Vice-President Student Affairs. As an institution that puts community first, Laurier has been a national leader in delivering exceptional student experiences for decades.

Across all of these experiences, from my early life in Guyana to my current role at Laurier, one idea has stood out above all others for me: the foundation of individual identity and human thriving is social connection.

## **The fundamental human need to matter and belong**

Working in student affairs is fascinating because the post-secondary experience is genuinely transformative for students. They are working through the big questions: Who am I? Who are my people? Where do I belong?

As such, the central purpose for student affairs professionals and programs is to create the conditions for students to thrive and grow during this time of transformation. Throughout my career, every effort I have made to pursue this purpose has been rooted in two core principles about the student – and human – experience:

1. To thrive, individuals need to believe they matter and belong
2. This belief develops through in-person community connection

In ways I never imagined would be necessary or possible, the isolation, separation and disconnection students experienced from the health measures implemented to contain the COVID-19 outbreak galvanized my belief in these principles. Put simply, when it comes to the well-being of individuals and groups, there is no substitute for face-to-face experiences (without the intervention of technology). There is no identity without society, no self without the other, no confidence without connection. Self-reliance cannot mean separateness. We become ourselves in community. Relationships are what give meaning and purpose to our lives.

## How the pandemic impacted students

When COVID-19 prevention and protection measures began to take hold on campuses, institutions were forced to close and reinvent – in a matter of days – how they delivered their programs. For students, it was a tidal wave of change and confusion compounded by the fear and uncertainty of the outbreak itself.

In student affairs, we scrambled to figure out how to replace our array of in-person experiences and supports with virtual offerings. And we did our best to help students navigate the functional changes that came with the shift to digital, which was often frustrating and not infrequently infuriating.

Knocked off balance by the pace of change, students never really recovered. Just like everyone was left in a state of limbo by virtual graduations, what students needed to process and adjust wasn't available. Despite our best efforts, there was very little we could do to protect students from the impact of the fundamental dislocation that had arrived in their lives. Here are five examples of the detrimental impacts the pandemic had on students.

### Student well-being and connection suffered – dramatically

The data indicates clearly that there has been an increase in mental health difficulties, suicides, feelings of loneliness and isolation, and disengagement among students. Many students have lost their sense of purpose, sources of good feeling, and clarity about their identity value. Also, they have struggled to make friends, as evidenced by a conversation I had recently with a student who said to me, “It’s good that you are opening the campus sometime in the fall, but I don't know how to find a roommate. I haven't met a friend.”

### Students from underrepresented and marginal groups were disproportionately impacted

When you live in a house with marble countertops and a big screen TV, you don't think twice about showing your home on a video call. But if you grew up like me in a house with peeling paint and had to study in the bathroom because it was the only private space, you aren't keen to show your peers and professors where you are. And what about students who don't have Internet at home? To learn, they had to camp outside a fast-food outlet or coffee shop and pick up the WiFi, even in winter. No one wants that to be known.

Obligatory online learning put socioeconomic status on display in a way that never happens with on-campus learning. The situation left students from those populations feeling that their privacy and boundaries had been invaded. They were also disproportionately impacted by the fact that student support in the pandemic was much more difficult to deliver, including the sort of mentoring that helps students from marginal groups persist.

### Student learning and performance suffered

In a virtual setting where significant portions of the learning experience occur asynchronously, it was difficult for students to adequately convey the stress that learning and living in a pandemic was having on them. They struggled to express how their academic performance was affected by disengagement and lack of motivation and purpose. They couldn't get across the limits online learning placed on their comprehension or how much a lack of connection with the instructor and their peers impacted them.

New students were particularly affected because having never been on campus or in a university setting made it difficult to navigate supports and resources effectively. The student support staff I work with went above and beyond to do what they could. But there were genuine limits to what was possible. In the end, students were generally on their own

to figure it out, which compounded the sense of isolation and languishing that limited their success.

### Students want and need in-person experiences

For adults who don't interact regularly with young people, it can be tempting to conclude they are "digital natives" who prefer online and virtual experiences over in-person connections. It's not true.

Today's students seek connection and feel the benefits of face-to-face interactions as much as students in any other generation. They want what students before them have had. They want a full-on student experience – in their classes, activities and social interactions. They want opportunities to come together. Yes, these students are more technologically engaged than any generation before them, but based on the feedback I can say these kids are clear that there is no substitute for in-person connection.

### Students are inherently good

I believe students are, in the main, inherently good people who look out for others and take their responsibility for the greater good to heart. And though some people in university settings resist that conclusion, I feel that the pandemic dramatically underlined this truth.

Yes, there were individuals and small groups who broke rules, acted out or ignored the health guidelines. But the vast majority of students took their responsibilities seriously. They were committed to protecting everyone around them, including their siblings, parents, grandparents, and extended families. Across the country, every university community saw students consistently adhere to public health guidelines and do their part to keep their communities safe.

## **Institutional leadership is about balancing tensions**

In a large institution, decision making, at every level, is an exercise in balancing tensions between the organization's structures and priorities and the needs and priorities of individuals and groups within the ecosystem. The sustainability, success and welfare of the organization and its community flow from how – and how well – the leadership balances these tensions.

Faced with the rapid onset of the pandemic, institutions were left with no playbook or precedent for their response. As a result, the major tensions had to be assessed and balanced in real time while making complex and difficult decisions on the fly. As a frame for the leadership lessons I want to share, I'd like to illustrate the major tensions institutions had to balance in the pandemic.

### Institutional priorities versus individual needs

As I have said, an ongoing aspect of my work is to help strike a balance when institutional priorities in areas like finance, legal and risk management collide with policies and practices that help students thrive. In the pandemic, these tensions were magnified when we worked through issues like rare acts of vandalism, students not following health guidelines, and developing new policies for how instruction and evaluation would be structured.

For some leaders in non-student areas, it is natural to consider the human element of decisions. These individuals seek out a student perspective and listen carefully when my

team and I weigh in. And when these people are in senior leadership roles, as at Laurier, the culture becomes highly empathetic and student-centric.

However, some leaders view students as a headache to be managed. This view creates an inherently “us versus them” mindset and often leads to painting all students with the same negative brush. This results in decisions that consistently put institutional priorities ahead of individual needs.

#### Power and control versus consultation and communication

A crisis tends to push people toward control or consultation, and the pandemic did so in a dramatic fashion. In some instances, I saw leaders consolidate power, close ranks, make decisions in isolation and issue orders. What’s more, I saw many employees welcome and invite this approach, preferring to fall in line and be told what to do. Leaving people out of decision making in their area of expertise leads to disenfranchisement and loss of passion. Worse yet, I saw the pernicious and harmful impact of bullies – individuals whose response to the crisis was to find ways to assert dominance, block progress and stop others from taking care of students.

Fortunately, what I saw most often were leaders whose inclination was to bring people together, co-create solutions and, most of all, communicate. This approach had predictable results. People felt inspired and engaged. They lent their voice and took ownership of plans of action. And, more often than not, teams had the best outcomes, best people and best answers.

#### Empathy versus inflexibility

No matter what systems we put in place or how much we tried to reinforce the need for flexibility, the level of support students received was ultimately up to individual staff, administrators and professors. Even “institutional” responses to the pandemic were just a reflection of the beliefs and views of the leaders primarily responsible for the decision making.

Would those in a position to make decisions be supportive, understanding and flexible? Would they give students the benefit of the doubt? Would they see that there were larger issues at play? Would they change their thinking about what it meant to “have standards?” Or would they prioritize their own needs and rigidly assert the “integrity” of their program?

A telling example of this tension came in the groundswell – initiated by students – for institutions to offer pass/fail grades in recognition of how challenging it was to learn under the existing conditions. Though institutional responses to the idea varied, there was generally an initial resistance, including from some groups of students who opposed the decision in fear it would negatively impact their applications to graduate schools.

Through time, more and more institutions got on board with the idea and most settled for offering some form of choice so that students could make decisions based on their particular situation.

#### Adaptability versus institutional inertia

Perhaps one of the most striking learnings from the pandemic was that universities really can be nimble in response to student needs. In a matter of weeks, institutions did what would otherwise have taken a decade to do, if it could have happened at all: they created

entirely new conditions for learning and working. By the time fall 2020 arrived, almost every post-secondary institution in the country had a way to deliver their programs virtually.

During the immediate response in March and longer adjustment period during the summer of 2020, institutions demonstrated that their inertia – in the form of policies, traditions, status quo and even just fixed ways of thinking – needn't prevail. If nothing else, this demonstrates that whenever there is tension between stasis and change, inertia doesn't have to win the day.

## Lessons in living and leading beyond COVID-19

First and foremost, the pandemic amplified my belief in a guiding principle about human thriving:

*ensure people believe they matter and belong by creating opportunities for in-person community connection.*

We need to look no farther than the suffering and struggles of students over the last year and a half to see the truth and value of this principle. Taking that principle as a north star and lens, there is much to be learned from the student experience of the pandemic and institutional responses to the tensions in play. Here are ten lessons at three different scales: individual, leadership and institutional.

### Individual

#### 1. Well-being and mental health are rooted in connection

Health and wellness flow from shared experiences. We make meaning and find purpose in shared experiences and relationships. We get support and overcome individual challenges by sharing our story. We are better – and meant to be – together.

#### 2. Performance and confidence are rooted in believing you matter and belong

I've been a high-performance coach for most of my career, and I can say without hesitation that the foundation of excellence is a belief in yourself. And that begins and ends with complete clarity about your value as a person, participant and member within the groups you join.

#### 3. A bully is a bully

We must be clear that individuals who abuse their power, seek to harm others and assert their own agendas with little regard for the impact it has on individuals and communities are bullies. We can not – and must not – tolerate bullies, no matter how hard it is to take them on.

### Leadership

#### 4. Empathy is an essential leadership trait

No matter how high level or policy-centric a leader's role becomes, there is always a need and responsibility to lead with empathy. I believe maintaining a focus on the human impact of decisions leads to inspired and energetic leadership. Resist becoming inured. Be human. Connect to people, even – and even particularly – when they are not in the room.

### 5. Co-creation and communication bring out the best in people and teams

Command and control is an outdated and detrimental mode of leadership. In contemporary organizations, leaders who emphasize engagement and invite contributions from a wide range of stakeholders achieve consistently superior results while fostering a culture of inclusion.

### 6. Leaders are responsible for creating opportunities for community connection

The leadership is responsible for generating opportunities for individuals and teams to feel connected so they can build a deep belief that they matter and belong. Come up with creative ways to bring people together and make it happen.

## Institutional

### 7. Institutions can be people-centric

We have seen that policies, procedures and priorities within institutions, no matter how large, can always be assessed based on how they impact people. What's more, I believe we have seen that we can go further: we can make decisions to inspire and empower individuals and groups to thrive.

### 8. Adaptability is an institutional obligation

We now know that large institutions not only can but must be ready for anything and continually adjust to whatever emerges in their context. Our job now is to bring this enhanced sense of adaptability to the everyday decisions we will face when the pandemic ebbs.

### 9. There are limits to the benefits of digital modes of engagement

When it comes to building community and giving people an "I matter, I belong" experience, there is simply no substitute for in-person connection. I hope we will be cautious about how much we embrace the digital revolution in the post-pandemic world.

### 10. Connection is the path to social justice and equity

I believe some of the essential learnings from the pandemic offer a path to a more equitable society. Systemic racism is about barriers to community and connection. Our ability to create inclusive cultures is partly determined by the in-person experiences we create that can foster understanding and empathy between people.

## Final reflections: leading – like living – is about connecting

I'm not sure I could have imagined the range of emotions I would feel working through the pandemic response with colleagues, students and families. A sense of helplessness and frustration at how little I could do for students in a remote learning context. Anger at the way some people treated students and the rationale they used to justify a lack of support. Fear about the fragility of life. Worry about the mental health of students and their families in the lockdown. Stress at the uncertainty and lack of control around the outbreak. Pressure from the responsibility we bear as leaders to keep people safe. Humility and a strand of shame at the privilege my wealth offers me and my family, so far removed from my early days when I was exactly like those kids who face a daily struggle to persist.

As bleak and challenging as this experience has been, I have found it inspiring. So much of what has transpired has deepened my belief in people and extended my

understanding of what students need and want. I feel more galvanized than ever in the need to create community connections. I feel a limitless desire to do everything in my power to ensure every student is genuinely thinking, “I matter. I belong.”

If I had to choose one word to describe how I feel as we emerge from this pandemic, it would be *hopeful*.

- I am hopeful that this indelible reminder of the fragility of human life makes everyone a bit more empathetic.
- I am hopeful that this blatant evidence of how much we rely on each other and impact each other – even across continents – has a lasting impact on our thinking.
- I am hopeful that the suffering and struggles of our students during this crisis can be a guiding light for universities that will inspire us to do more.
- I am hopeful that the adaptability we have shown will lead us to be more innovative and visionary.
- I am hopeful that the fundamental lesson that our well-being and sense of self are rooted in human connection will never fade from our minds.

Sometime soon, campuses will reopen and in-person classes will resume. When they do, we will take our first grateful steps back to the way university is supposed to be. And we will carry with us the learnings of the pandemic and the indelible influence this experience has had on our ways of being, living, working and leading.