The Promotion of "Character" and its Relationship to Retention in Higher Education

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Abstract: With transition to university a strong focus across most higher education institutions, undergraduate teacher education programs have been increasingly scrutinised regarding their (in)ability to adequately prepare students for the challenging social contexts that they will meet. As a result, there has been a burgeoning of approaches which initiate beginning students. In the Education Faculty of a regional Australian university, the FYI (First Year Infusion/For Your Information) Program attempts to build capacity among pre-service students in a supportive learning community. In an intentionally created context, the program provides a Learning Circle approach to student support. Through consciously infusing the value of "character" into the transition program, there is evidence of tangible impacts upon students' interactions in the learning process and their commitment to course completion. Data are presented that suggest that students' high quality interactions with peers and academic staff in an informal context are vital to academic success, and that staff also benefit from this program. It would suggest that the development of effective partnerships between all stakeholders is paramount in helping to build capacity.

Introduction

Entry into university has traditionally been associated with special expectations and excitement, as well as with varying degrees of tension and anxiety. In the higher education context in Australia, and indeed globally, there is increased interest in the first year university experience with regard to addressing the high attrition rates of this critical time in the student learning journey (Ellis, 2002; Falk & Balatti, 1999; Hayden & Long, 2006; Krause, 2006). Universities are focused on attracting and retaining students, particularly in today's competitive marketplace. It is argued here that, in order to address transition and retention issues, effective social integration and support has to accompany academic preparedness. At the regional Australian university discussed in this article, student retention and progression issues in the first year of study are regarded as high priorities and the program that we established attempts to respond to these. The program was based on an understanding that it is essential to make opportunities, knowledges and skills available to students so that they can engage actively in a cycle of learning and reflection from the outset of their study. In particular, we argue that successful transition into university involves the establishment of social networks and relationships and that the social can facilitate academic success. Through the establishment of social connections, "character" and

its associated attributes, such as resilience, fairness, trustworthiness, caring and community participation, are understood as important aspects of the transition process.

First year student transition, attrition and retention are complex issues concerning all universities and research suggests that if students are retained beyond their first year subsequent dropout is much lower (Blunden, 2002; Prosser & Trigwell, 2002). Traditionally, technical-rational models have guided much curriculum development and delivery in higher education and, in recent times, such approaches have been increasingly scrutinised in terms of their (in)ability to adequately prepare students for the challenging social contexts in which their future work will be undertaken. This has led to increasing pressures on academic staff in relation to the measurement of teaching and learning outcomes (Marginson, 2007; Zimitat, 2006) and a need to find new ways of interacting and relating to students. There is also widespread recognition of a need to focus on social as well as academic preparedness in the development of programs designed to support students in their transition to university (Noble & Henderson, 2008; Hayden & Long, 2006; Krause, 2006). As Palmer, O'Kane and Owens (2009) highlighted, it is important that students begin to develop a sense of belonging in the university context and to feel like "fully-fledged members of university life" (p. 37). While the literature suggests multiple perspectives on transition and retention issues and highlights a diversity of views and experiences, there are many common themes and issues. These include academic preparedness, financial support and social support.

In the Faculty of Education of the university where we work, a context-specific approach has been adopted. The FYI (First Year Infusion/For Your Information) Program aims to be responsive to students' needs, particularly in terms of information and academic literacies and other formal aspects of learning management relevant to the transition to university. Through emphasising relationships between students as well as between academic staff and students, the program is deemed essential to building the capacity of all stakeholders.

The focus in this article is how the development of cohesive social support networks empowers individuals and becomes sustainable beyond the students' initial transition into university. Such insights should inform future learning and the development of resources to guide academics in enhancing relationships and interactions with students entering university who are "negotiating new rules, identities, environments, academic expectations and content, [as well as] having to form new friendship groups" (Burnett, 2006, p. 1). The quality of the relationships between students and staff is deemed important for creating a climate of trust and building connectedness. Curriculum and pedagogy need to be aligned with the perspectives of the students and continually shaped by academics to enhance agency (Marton, Hounsell, & Entwistle, 1997; Prosser & Trigwell, 2002; Ramsden, 2003). Indeed, good teaching involves engaging students in a relational learning context.

This article builds on a previous article where we presented some of the initial outcomes of the FYI Program (see Noble & Henderson, 2008). This time, however, we consider the implications for staff and students of a program that addresses students' academic needs through social support. We begin by discussing the thinking behind the use of a Learning Circle approach and explaining how the FYI Program developed and expanded from a pilot project. We then use data that were collected as part of the research that accompanied the program and we begin to tease out the role of "character" in the program's operations. We conclude by discussing how this information might be important in informing future practice.

A Learning Community: The Use of a Learning Circle Approach

The Learning Circle approach (Aksim, 1998; Noble & Henderson, 2008; Riel, 2006) uses the notion of a learning community or community of practice, whereby students and academics join together to enhance critically reflective skills, incorporate tacit knowledge and engage in dialogue (Wenger, 1998) to enhance their learning and teaching. The idea of developing the Learning Circle process was underpinned by the belief that it would enhance student engagement by creating a space where individual identities would interact with students' developing educational identities. For students, the space – including the physical location or room where we met and the more abstract notion of being able to move away from the pressures and stresses of study – offered opportunities to increase their understandings of the discourses that were shaping and impacting upon their learning experiences.

The initial pilot project of the FYI Program focused on the development of agency in self-identified "at-risk" first year education students (see Noble & Henderson, 2008). It set out to create a supportive learning community where first year education students, academics, and learning and teaching support staff were able to consider the multiple realities that characterise students' learning journeys. Through joining the learning community – a place and space where the students could talk with other students and with academic staff during a two hour timeslot each week – the students had the opportunity to develop social networks and a range of academic capabilities, including information literacies and subject-specific knowledges. Interpersonal skills and groupness were considered essential features that support students' academic achievement.

The pilot project operated through our facilitation of a Learning Circle approach (Aksim, 1998; Noble & Henderson, 2008; Riel, 2006), with a group of between 5 and 15 first year, self-identified "at-risk" education students meeting with us on a weekly basis to problem-solve any of the difficulties that they had been experiencing with their study. It quickly became evident that the students found it beneficial to discuss and critically reflect upon social issues that they regarded as important and as having an impact on their ability to study effectively. There was no formal structuring of these sessions and we made no formal presentations to the students. Instead, we talked with students, allowing them to direct conversation towards issues that concerned them. This meant that dialogic conversation was co-constructed, always emerging from the student concerns raised at the time. The learning community that was established, therefore, was a site for social support. It was entirely focused on issues identified by the students. As we have described elsewhere (see Noble & Henderson, 2008), we initially planned an academic focus for the program, but it was apparent that it was a focus on the social that met the students' needs.

In the following year, we extended upon the foundations and successes of the pilot by developing a system that incorporated wider involvement of other personnel, including other academics from our faculty, the librarian assigned to the faculty, and learning and teaching support staff from the university's Learning and Teaching Support Unit. From student feedback during the pilot, the building of social networks, with other students and with staff, was identified as a critical element of the program. Greater involvement and collaboration were seen as ways of enhancing the student learning journey and improving retention, whilst also providing opportunities for the professional development of academic staff through cross-departmental discussion and problem-solving. The further development of the FYI Program, then, had an

element of duality: to provide a more integrated and infused approach to supporting students socially and academically, while at the same time enhancing collaboration amongst faculty staff and promoting partnerships with learning and teaching support personnel and library staff.

Drawing on Gee's (1996) notion of Discourses as "ways of behaving, interacting, valuing, thinking, believing, speaking, and often reading and writing" (p. viii), we argue that the higher education context creates a new Discourse – the Discourse of *university student*. Beginning students need to become familiar with this, especially if they do not bring explicit knowledge of what it means or what it might involve to be in a university. Within the university context, issues of identity and relationships with the institution or authority are generally not considered in an explicit way (Henderson & Hirst, 2007; Lea & Street, 1998), leaving students to work out for themselves how to fit in to the context. As Gee (1996) explained, Discourses involve a "usually taken for granted and tacit 'theory' of what counts as a 'normal' person and the 'right' ways to think, feel, and behave" (p. ix). Additionally, Discourses "do not always represent consistent and compatible values" and the taking on of a new Discourse can be a difficult and stressful process (p. ix). In using the Learning Circle approach, all students are afforded opportunities to critically reflect on their experiences and on their ways of "doing", "being" and "knowing" within the university context as a pedagogical place in their lives.

In focusing on Gee's (1996) understandings about "interacting, valuing, thinking, believing" and so on, the Learning Circle approach has clear links to the development of character as described in the character education literature (e.g. Kagan, 2001; Leming, 1993; Lickona, 1993, 1996; Lovat & Toomey, 2007). As we will discuss later in this article, the infusion of character into the transition/support program is instrumental in ensuring that care, respect and inclusion become key attributes of the students' experiences in the learning context (Kagan, 2001).

Creating a Space: A Sense of Place

In this article it is argued that the Learning Circle approach adopted in the FYI Program contributed to wider social changes for the participants and impacted significantly on their discourse and practice of university life. Within the space that the Learning Circle provided, academics and students were proactive in identifying, creating, maintaining and enhancing desired and mutually beneficial relationships that were perceived to be of value. The space offered a safe haven in which students were able to use their strengths to problem-solve issues in the university context, to question and confront their fears and challenges, and to find support and reassurance about their experiences and the things that were challenging them. As a result, it was apparent that students were developing a 'sense of place' and belonging in the university context. They were also able to access academic and support staff and to make connections with the support services offered by the university. Yet, the relationship was not one-sided. Academic and support staff also benefited. They found that they learnt from the students and from each other, and that these understandings could help to shape and modify supportive practices outside the Learning Circle.

In seeking to understand what was happening in the Learning Circle space and how it was helping students to build capacity and to move towards a 'sense of place' within their student learning journey, critically reflective and focused

conversations were conducted during the course of the academic year and at the end of the students' first year of university. Together, academic staff and students explored their initial experiences as well as the longer term effects of participation in the learning community (Burnett, 2006; Gruenewald, 2003). These conversations were video-recorded and transcribed for analysis. Excerpts are used throughout this article to illustrate the impact that this initiative has had on student understandings of how participation in this created space assisted them in their transition to university and led to the development of a sense of place in terms of personal and professional identity. Important to this investigation is the sense of connectedness that developed in what for many was initially a contested space and the evidence of the importance of particular characteristics that are usually associated with character education – including resilience, respect, responsibility, fairness, trustworthiness, caring, and community participation (see Kagan, 2001; Leming, 1993; Lickona, 1993, 1996; Lovat & Toomey, 2007).

Infusion of Character in Developing Sense of Place

As this project is situated in a Faculty of Education, we are cognisant of the need to prepare students for complex educational contexts. Regardless of their intended discipline, sector or prior experiences, emerging teachers need information and guidance on how to develop and demonstrate a positive disposition in these contexts and to be able to form connections in order to have a sense of place. Seeing pre-service teacher education as the beginning of induction towards 'becoming a teacher', it is imperative that this discourse is explored in terms of personal and professional epistemologies and ontologies that will shape their practice.

Within the learning community that was created, academics and students explored personal and professional development issues and investigated explicitly the discourses of *university student* and *professional educator*. Through the privileging of interactions and relationships, students made connections to personal and professional discourses with a view to developing a sense of agency and a growing capacity to move within and between their multiple identities, working towards the development of a positive professional identity as a committed and well-balanced or 'centred' educator.

A vision of a centred educator, one who 'teaches from the heart', is based upon Hargreaves' (1994) notion of the boundless self, where an individual is able to dynamically respond to the changing environment through a continually reflexive stance. According to Palmer (1998), a good teacher could be defined as being able to weave connections between the self, the subject and the students. As such, teacher education programs must demonstrate congruence between rhetoric and practice, with the core part of transition to university beginning with recognition of the importance of delivering these elements in a planned, systematic and sustainable way.

While many academics involved in working with first year students at university recognise the significant involvement required to effect change and reform, often the emphasis is on the academic aspect of the learning journey with other university support services working alongside to offer the social support system. However, the literature on values or character education – predominantly founded in the areas of primary and secondary schooling (e.g. Kagan, 2001; Leming, 1993; Lickona, 1993, 1996; Lovat & Toomey, 2007) – indicates that positive educational cultural change is impacted by a deep commitment by the organisation (Darling-

Hammond, 1997, 2006) as well as individual teachers to a vision, energy and focus. This suggests the building of the character of resilient learners, where a cohesive and integrated approach unites student learning and behaviour (Lovat & Toomey, 2007). As Leming (1993) explained, character develops "within a social web" (p. 69). By explicitly setting out to develop a social network, the FYI Program ensured that the elements of character were embedded and that students began to understand the importance of developing a learning community while at the same time becoming aware of the strengths that they bring to the university context.

Just like in the primary and secondary schooling sectors, educational research into the role that relationships play in enhanced educational impacts for pre-service teachers in higher education suggests that the stronger the interpersonal relationships between teacher and learner, the more likely the students are to demonstrate attributes such as self management, greater capacity for critical reflection and increased levels of confidence in the learning journey and their sense of personal and professional fulfilment (Darling-Hammond, 1997, 2006; Palmer, 1998). Higher education can borrow much from the character education research literature to find new and more effective ways to engage students in the lifelong learning journey. Like young children and adolescents, the adult learner requires a means of understanding, interpreting and challenging unspoken norms in relation to character within their future educational contexts and a means of developing relevant social and professional support networks to sustain them on their lifelong learning journey.

Within the FYI Program, the complex and multi-faceted nature of the development and maintenance of these essential relationships through critical reflection is an important focal point. The Learning Circle provides a supportive environment where student to student interaction as well as student to staff interaction facilitates problem-solving around the issues raised by students. By being part of a learning community and sharing their experiences, the students are able to reflect and to listen to the reflections of others. Through the caring relationships that develop as part of this process, the students share responsibility for making sure that strengths are valued and used as the foundations for problem-solving.

Subjective Motivations in Forming a Collective Movement

This learning community approach promotes sustainable change in first year learning and teaching by encouraging pedagogical conversation and the development of 'community strategies' (Palmer, 1998; Wilson, 2007). Within the learning community, dialogic reflection with students as they were about to transition from first year into their second year of university illustrated the positive effects that this planned and systematic approach has had on their perceptions of themselves as successful learners. The Learning Circle space enabled the construction of close friendships and the perceived balancing of power relationships. In fact, attendance at the Learning Circle was the first contact for each of the students with each other; they had not previously known each other. However, from these early encounters, social networks developed whereby students began to rely on one another and to also count on the academics involved for ongoing social and academic support. This is outlined in the following excerpt, where two students elaborate on the 'sense of place' that had developed and on the calming effects of belonging to the social space of the Learning Circle as the beginning of their transition to university:

> Student 1: *When we came to [the learning circle] and shut the door, it was like we got to shut out everything that was going on and we had time just to be and to think through solutions to each others' problems. It felt good to know that we came to care about one another and that we could actually help each other. Really, sometimes if it wasn't for our Wednesday meeting, I don't think I would have made it through the week.*
>
> Student 2: *Sometimes it was knowing that (names of the academic staff) were putting the time aside to help us out and we didn't want to let them down … each time we finished on a Wednesday and we all had to go back to the outside world at uni I felt really calm, no matter how stressed I felt before I walked in. I still feel like that now.*

Many of the students involved in the FYI Program claimed similar benefits of the Learning Circle. They applauded the sense of calmness and the freedom to discuss the challenges that were worrying them in a place where no one expected them to be something that they thought they were not. As another student explained:

> *I was at uni and I could just sit. If I had questions I could get answers but if not I could just talk and chat and relax and still be in that uni environment.*

The students valued social integration and support. Although they regarded academic adjustment and integration as important, their individual academic issues took a secondary position to social integration and support. Most of the students highlighted relationship building as a significant outcome of attending the FYI Program. In the words of one student:

> *But I would have been lost. I probably would have given up and said, blow it. I just had a very emotional rollercoaster ride … and had I not had the relationships that I'd built through here there's no way I would have got through it at all.*

By having a specific time and place for students to meet informally, the students became independent and at the same time interdependent. It was evident that the social relationships of power had shifted, with the place and space of the Learning Circle enabling both individual and collective responsibility to occur. This is illustrated in the following excerpt where one of the students identifies the move towards a community approach where everyone takes responsibility to ensure the inclusion and support of others:

> *I make sure that no matter what else is happening I am always here on a Wednesday. Sometimes it is the only sane time that I have. (Names of the academics) are always so happy to see us and they seem to really care about how we are going. Our group has really become a bit like a big family. We all listen and we all share and help each other out. No-one is really in control and we just all help each other out. (Names of the academics) made sure we all got our turn in the beginning, that we were all included, but we do that for ourselves now. We organise ourselves if they (academics) are running late; we just get started and everyone joins in as they arrive. It's great. I don't know what I would do without them all now.*

Interestingly, the students also noted shared values as one of the characteristics of the social networks that had developed as part of the Learning Circle approach. As one student explained, a really important part of the process was "getting to know" other students and this was important in overcoming her own insecurity about whether she would be successful:

meeting people who are in the same position as you, I think, like have the same values as you, get to know you. ... [University] was just too much, it was too much. I needed some help here. It was like nothing was going right for me. Can I keep going? Can I do this?

It is evident that the students developed genuine appreciation and respect for their peers and themselves as learners. They were also meta-cognitively aware of their intrinsic motivation to engage in the ongoing learning journey, attributing this to their concrete experience of collectively making a difference by assisting others in exploring real and personally meaningful issues. By privileging all participants, the Learning Circle helped to create a space where the students were able to become agents of their university learning journeys. Unless new university students can feel that they belong to the learning community of the university, then their chances of being successful students are likely to be diminished (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). As one of the students attending FYI explained:

the main focal point of going to FYI ... it was always there and it was always very empathetic. There was no worries about what I wanted to talk about which was very nice. Because sometimes I ... just needed to say, can somebody just get me back on track? Rather than, I can't use [or do this] or I can't find this reference. But those things were always covered if I needed them to be.

The students' academic results

Although the students' comments provide one type of evidence that the FYI Program met students' needs in terms of transition into university, it is also useful to look at what happened with their academic results. We are mindful, though, that the FYI Program was set up initially to provide support for students who identified themselves as 'at-risk' of 'dropping out' or of failure within the university context. Whilst this meant that the program focused initially on a small group of students, we argue that the retention of even small numbers is in itself a measure of the success of the program, assisting students in their bid for a university qualification and assisting the university in a more pragmatic way through the financial benefits that come from retaining students.

Although we have extended the program and it is now available to all Education students who are making the transition into university, it is very difficult to measure the effects of the program in terms of student results. In particular, this is because of the multiple factors that impact on students' successes or otherwise in the university context, as well as the 'drop in' nature of the program. There has never been any requirement for students to attend regularly. However, they know that the program is available if and when they need it.

What we present here, therefore, are the results of students who attended the FYI Program regularly during their first year of university. These results relate to the first year results of 5, 15 and 9 students in the first, second and third years of the program respectively. As shown in Figure 1, the 29 students studied 265 courses and

their results demonstrated their overwhelming success in university study. The majority of results have been at HD or A levels and only one student failed one course. (The grades used by our university are High Distinction (HD), A, B and C for pass results and F for a fail result.)
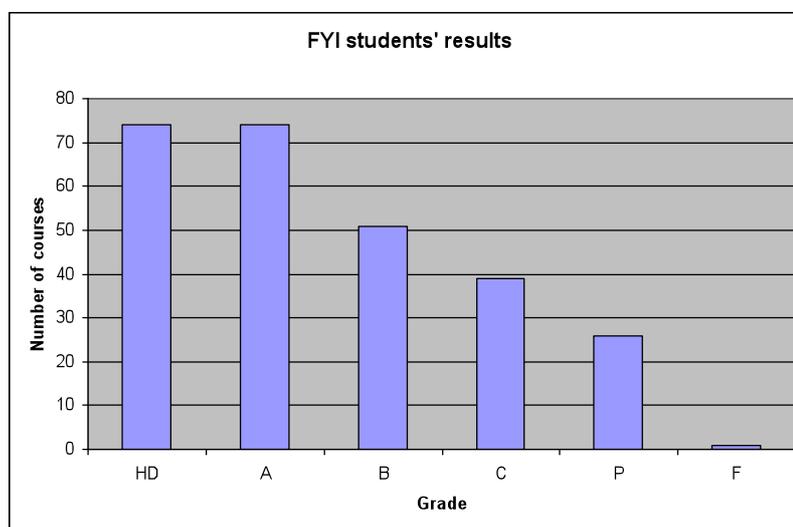
Note: The HD-F scale is used for most courses. The P result represents a pass result in a small number of courses that use a pass/fail result only.

Figure 1. First year results for FYI student in the first three years of the program

The continuation of the 29 students on the student learning journey was seen as an important measure of success. Whilst 27 of the students continued at university, two students deferred their study – one due to pregnancy and the other for reasons unknown. None of the students withdrew from university altogether. From Table 1, it is clear that a high rate of student progression occurred in relation to these particular groups of students, both from Semester 1 to Semester 2 of the first year as well as from the initial year of study to the second year of their degree program.

Progression variables	Student cohort		
	2007	**2008**	**2009**
Total students who attended FYI regularly	5	15	9
Total % of students continuing Semester 1 to Semester 2 in first year	100%	95%	100%
Reasons for not continuing to Semester 2	n/a	Deferral (reason not known)	n/a
Total % of students continued from first year to second year of university	80%	n/a	100%
Reasons for not continuing to second year	Deferral (pregnancy)	n/a	n/a

Table 1. FYI student progression over the first three years of the program

Professional development opportunities for university staff

The FYI Program has proved useful as a form of professional development for academic and support staff. In being privy to students' critical reflections, staff have been able to transfer students' feedback about particular issues to relevant services and staff within the university. In this way, FYI has provided a conduit between students and the university. As one staff member explained:

> *[Sometimes] we would still be here after all the students had left; we'd be still sitting there and we'd be micro-analysing all the questions and what had happened.*

Additionally, the staff involved in the FYI Program articulated the advantages of participation to the professional development of university staff. They explained that they learnt from each other. In one recorded conversation, one of the staff who regularly attended the Learning Circle meetings described how another academic staff member left with enhanced knowledge about information literacies:

> *We had another academic … working with us who hadn't used Google Scholar … we were walking the students through because … they were just using Google not Google Scholar and we were trying to explain the difference. It was amazing because I think that day that academic probably left learning more than what even the students did. And it was just a wonderfully rich experience.*

Another staff member talked about her personal experience. She explained that the students are:

> *getting practical support with their assignment or library searches or those things we've looked at. I'm learning a hell of a lot about, from [the librarian] … you know, I'm learning a lot just from hearing what everyone's saying.*

Even though staff professional development was not a planned outcome of the program, staff were enthused that there were advantages to them. They did not participate in the program to 'teach' students, but to become involved in shared problem-solving and learning. In other words, there were benefits to all who participated, not just the students.

Conclusions

Engaging first year students through genuine relationships is a plausible strategy for addressing retention issues and enhancement of teaching and learning. As such, attention to how best to initiate and maintain such relationships over time is warranted. Voluntary relationships are seen as genuine (Raciti & Mitchell, 2007) and therefore it is important to know how to develop and maintain these. Across the higher education teaching and learning literature good teaching is understood as helping students to learn (Prosser & Trigwell, 2002), but to do so students need to be retained in the context.

We have argued in this article that the building of character (Kagan, 2001; Leming, 1993; Lickona, 1993, 1996; Lovat & Toomey, 2007) played an instrumental role in the way that the FYI Program operated. Through facilitating the students' access and participation in social networks, the program fostered the students' resilience, their caring for the academic progress of themselves as well as others, and their support of others who were challenged by the university context.

With an ultimate mission of building the character and careers of students and staff through relationship building, the description in this article of the FYI Program demonstrated focused efforts on student achievement and success as well as on institutional excellence in connecting with all students. With the parallel benefit of professional development for academic staff, we argue that the FYI Program provides confirmation that a program can serve the needs of students as well as staff. We recommend a shift in focus for professional development. The FYI Program has shown some of the advantages in using an approach where equal emphasis is given to

personal and professional identity development through relationships and clear links are made between the social and academic components of the student learning journey. These are useful tenets to guide professional development and to build capacity for academics.

We argue that the development and maintenance of authentic partnerships and relationships are keys to the transformation of university transition programs. In the program we have described, the approach enabled the students as well as tertiary education academics to consider the multiple realities characterising success on the learning journey (Moss, 2003; Wenger, 1998). The focus on character played a key role in helping to retain students, but it also involved staff in a rethinking of their understandings about students' transition to university, thus beginning to challenge taken-for-granted grand narratives of what it means to teach and learn in higher education contexts. Further investigations might set out to measure more tangible impacts on the quality of interactions, relationships and friendships that occur for the student and academic participants through the remainder of the student learning journey and on students' commitment to completion of their undergraduate learning journey.

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