Beyond Survival

Toward Affirming, Dignifying and Humanizing Student Outcomes

A Kinetic Seeds Mental Health and Student Success Briefing

June 2023

"*I think that mental health for us, as students, is one of our most pressing issues because our mental wellbeing impacts our campus performance, not only as students, but also as people.*"

College student describing the critical value of mental wellbeing.

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"It would look like a space of growth and healing, where learning takes actual precedent. Not the numbers or the measurements, but more of a softer, qualitative, relational aspect. Where I can sit in this classroom and take the time it takes me to learn."

College student describing the makeup of an affirming education experience.

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In the winter of 2023, 31 college students from across the country participated in a research opportunity to elevate their voice in service of better understanding of what a nurturing campus culture without mental health stigmas could look like and how the student experience could improve if mental health was nurtured in a way that worked for students. What does it mean to be "mentally healthy"? How do students know when they are? How do they cope when they're not? How do they nurture themselves? These are just some of the avenues of inquiry we explored.

To each student who gave so generously of their time and experience – we say thank you. You taught us much about how we might alter the design of higher education to better support you and your vision for the future. And while we acknowledge that you are but one voice who does not represent the whole of your race or culture, it's through engagements such as this when student voice creates change.

The work included a foundation-setting survey to help us get a pulse check on student perspectives, a set of 1:1 interviews to gain a deeper view into their individual lived experiences, and a cross-college design retreat to consider and co-create better support principles, mechanisms and structures.

What follows is a rich understanding of what it means to succeed and thrive in higher education today. These insights provide valuable perspectives for faculty, staff, mental health practitioners, and policymakers to consider when developing and implementing strategies to support the mental health and well-being of students.

Lead Researchers Christine Flanagan and sahibzada mayed

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Let's Begin With the End

The prevailing notion of student success is fundamentally flawed. Institutions must lead the way in redefining its criteria by incorporating essential elements of self-care and community care in service of happier and healthier students and flourishing campus communities. It's what students need from higher education today.

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Makeup* of Student Cohort

Thirty-one students participated
87% of students between 18 and 24
45% first-generation
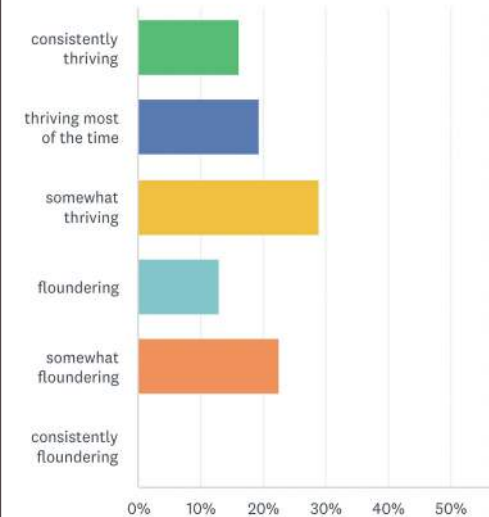16% first year, 16% second year, 29% third year, 32% fourth year
81% work for pay

Latina
African American
Mixed Race
White Asian
Black Hispanic

Female
non-binary Male

*We purposefully keep racial and ethnic identity questions open-ended as it allows respondents to self-identify and express their backgrounds in their own words. We believe this approach recognizes the diverse and fluid nature of racial and ethnic identities and avoids imposing pre-defined categories that may not accurately capture individuals' experiences or identities.

To what extent do you think you are thriving as a college student today?

consistently thriving
thriving most of the time
somewhat thriving
floundering
somewhat floundering
consistently floundering

0% 10% 20% 30% 40% 50%

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Institutions Represented

Alvernia University
Berklee College of Music
Cornell University
Grand Canyon University
Haverford College
James Madison University
Liberty University
Northeastern University
Northwestern Connecticut CC
Northwestern University
Princeton University

Providence College
Regis University
Sam Houston State University
Schwarzman College Tsinghua University
SUNY Cortland
University of Denver
University of Minnesota
University of North Georgia
University of Rhode Island
Winona State University

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Context and Key Words

There are a few critical perspectives that informed our approach to this work. These perspectives were in service of both understanding student mental health and well-being while at the same time supporting the mental health of participating students.

1. We employed the use of the term "bodymind" to view the interconnected nature of our mind and our body and how they relate to each other. Contrary to dominant narratives, this reframe recognizes the intertwinement of our physical and mental as offered by Dr. Sami Schalk.

2. We pushed ourselves to emphasize the importance of understanding mental health within its socio-cultural and historical context as offered by the work of Michael T. Compton, M.D., M.P.H., and Ruth S. Shim, M.D., M.P.H.

3. We tended to shift our focus away from medicalized and pathologized discourses as (1) they are covered extensively in current research and approaches and (2) they can feel stigmatizing and center deficit ways of thinking. For more on this, see the research of Victim Focus, a professional organization working to tackle prejudice and stereotyping of adults and children subjected to crime, violence, abuse and trauma.

4. We casted the term "thrive" to help students think about their talents and abilities and relied upon the work of Dr. Laurie Schreiner whose research explores the difference between students who thrive in college compared to those who succeed or merely survive. For more, visit the *Thriving Project* research initiative Azusa Pacific University.

5. We used principles of liberatory design which is an emerging power sharing process that encourages both radical critical reflection of oneself and various power imbalances within social, economic, and political systems. For more on this, see the research of Tania Anaissie, David Clifford, Susie Wise, and the National Equity Project [Victor Cary and Tom Malarkey].

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Student Mental Health
A Complex Journey of Struggle and Finding Support

Introduction

Exploring the Interplay of Campus Culture, Community Support, and Institutional Responsiveness

In the intricate realm of student mental health, a complex and nuanced understanding emerges, one that recognizes its vital role in the educational journey and its intricate interplay with student success. Students unequivocally acknowledge the significance of mental wellbeing, linking it to campus culture, peer support, self-care practices, and the quality of relationships with professors, staff, and peers. Upholding and nurturing mental health requires an unwavering commitment, and its deep entanglement with campus life underscores the need for robust institutional support.

Our research findings highlight the imperative recognition of both institutional and peer support in addressing mental health concerns. There is also a prevailing belief in the power of community-based support and inclusive representation within mental health programs.

Nonetheless, concerns loom regarding stigma, harm within classes, and the accessibility of mental health services. Holistic care and personal growth are viewed as integral aspects, as is the profound impact of identity and the behavior of others.

What follows are three sections of findings that explore and examine mental health and wellbeing and its effect on the student experience:

Section 01 Mental Wellness
What does it mean to be mentally healthy and how do you know when you are?

Section 02 Identity
The Interplay of Student Identity and Mental Health

Section 03 Care Culture
The Difference Maker

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01 Mental Wellness

What does it mean to be mentally healthy and how do you know when you are?

We learned from students that there is no single "right" way to define or maintain mental health. It's a continuous and ongoing process that requires active effort and adaptation to changing circumstances. However, there are pockets of external and internal support students draw from and some societal constructs they challenge.

BREAKING STIGMA

CONVENTION-BUSTING

NURTURING THE SOUL

BEYOND SURVIVAL

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BREAKING STIGMA

Students note the hesitancy or reluctance to seek mental health support, often due to fear or anxiety about confronting personal issues and challenges. This includes feelings of skepticism about the effectiveness of counseling, concerns about being judged or stigmatized for seeking help, and uncertainty about how to access mental health resources.

"I am burned out from being a student, leading an affinity group, working on campus, and partaking in fellowships. I have responsibilities outside of college which make this even more difficult. I found out two years ago that I have ADHD. Since then, I still don't have access to therapy or medication, and it affects every part of my life. My parents don't understand what ADHD is and as immigrants especially, there is a stigma to therapy. Assignments keep pouring in regardless if I'm okay or not though."

"Not until I believe my first semester of sophomore year or even second semester, when I finally mustered up the courage, because I was so hesitant at first."

"I have had a hard time asking for help, especially in academics and, you know, in grade school and high school, I was always one of the top students. So, kids were always like if you need to ask for help, you're not actually smart. You shouldn't have to ask for help."

"I know I'll always have this piece of me that dealt with this, because I have self-harmed, I have attempted suicide, and those things will always be a part of me and who I am. I'll use the analogy like if somebody's very stressed, they always hold these bricks on their shoulders and that's really what it was. It was like a building that was just on my shoulders."

"I didn't want to go alone. I even had someone come with me to the center and just kind of walk me, because I was scared."

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CONVENTION-BUSTING

Students offer a range of perspectives that challenge societal norms, question established definitions, and advocate for alternative approaches to mental health care and education. They also encourage a broader and more inclusive understanding of mental health and mental illness.

"I kind of take the opinion that mental illness is fake. It's all made up by society to define who needs to be outcasted and who is not normal and who needs to be ostracized and put away or put in jail or otherwise cut from society."

"I wish mental health wasn't seen as just an illness or something to be fixed, but as a normal part of being human. We all have our ups and downs, and it's important to have a support system that recognizes that and doesn't stigmatize it."

"I hate the word "healthy". I think it is such a Westernized concept. Especially as someone who deals with mental illness and some chronic disabilities, I am never "mentally healthy" as considered by Western standards."

"But why do we send them to the hospital? What is this hospital providing that I cannot or that our community cannot?

"...what education is for is to create laborers of a capitalistic system, like I don't think it's designed for learning. I don't think it's designed to create like lifelong learners, or to generate growth or facilitate human connection."

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NURTURING THE SOUL

Students view the exploration of spirituality as leading to personal growth and transformation. Some students find solace and support in their spiritual beliefs, considering them integral to their mental well-being. Others say spirituality provides a sense of connectedness. Each highlights the importance of recognizing and respecting diverse spiritual or faith-based perspectives when addressing mental health.

"Exploring different spiritual beliefs and practices has been an eye-opening journey for me. It has allowed me to challenge my preconceived notions and expand my understanding of the world. It's a continuous process that enriches my mental health and broadens my perspective."

"Exploring spirituality has been a significant part of my mental health journey. It has provided me with a sense of purpose, inner peace, and a greater understanding of myself. It's like nourishment for my soul."

"Spirituality has been a guiding light in my mental health recovery. It has given me a framework to make sense of my experiences, find meaning in adversity, and cultivate a sense of gratitude for the present moment. It's a deep well of support that I can always turn to."

"I feel like my mental health definitely benefits from being a spiritual person and so I try to include it in some of my daily life and weekly life."

"Spirituality has provided me with a sense of connectedness to something greater than myself. It has helped me feel supported and guided, even during challenging times. It's a source of comfort and strength."

"I used to view mental health and spirituality as separate entities, but I've come to realize how interconnected they are. Nurturing my spirituality has had a profound impact on my mental well-being, helping me cultivate self-compassion and a deeper understanding of myself and others."

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BEYOND SURVIVAL

Students envision a campus environment that goes beyond meeting basic needs and survival. They emphasize the importance of a holistic approach to education that values growth, healing, and the well-being of students. This includes creating spaces that affirm identities, foster mutual aid, and prioritize individual dignity.

"I feel affirmed in spaces where I visibly have a place and I'm very visibly recognized as a person taking up space, and where that is met with acceptance, validity and support."

"[It's] a space that's designed for people like me and when I go to those spaces, I can make space for myself which makes me feel very affirmed."

"[It] means that not only do you recognize the student as a student, but you recognize your student as a person and address their holistic needs."

"I think that [students] shouldn't have to worry if they're gonna be scrutinized or viewed as less than human for who they are, whether it be because of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, anything like that. Then they can focus on the more exciting and fun things."

"At my university, they had a program for first-gen students and it was tailored to everything we might need for extra support. We had mentors or facilitators that we could refer to, they coordinated meetups, they had resources to refer us to. And that felt really dignifying because in some ways I thought I would be left behind. They helped me catch up in that sense."

"I think different people swim at different capacities or have different things that keep them afloat, whether that's privilege, or socioeconomic status or things they're born with or things that are given. Without those floaties, there's a lack of floating."

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The Interplay of Student Identity and Mental Health

Student perspectives shed light on the various ways in which identities, ranging from race and gender to sexuality and socioeconomic status, influence their mental health and wellbeing.

THE WEIGHT OF IDENTITY

MYRIAD OF INTERSECTING STRUGGLES

EMPOWERMENT AND RESILIENCE

(NON)- AFFIRMATION

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THE WEIGHT OF IDENTITY

For many students, their identities are multifaceted which create negative effects on their mental health. Some students grapple with the stress of concealing aspects of their identity from certain people, resulting in heightened caution and a constant need for self-regulation. The burden of conforming to societal expectations can be mentally draining, leading to feelings of limitation and unease.

"My identities impact my mental health and well-being moderately as a student in a city that is primarily white middle-upper class and striving for a profession in an industry where a lot of the most successful people do not look like me."

"I also struggle to truly express myself as a black/hispanic woman, sometimes I feel like being my true self is too much for others and it's tiring on my mental health to have to limit myself and think so much about my perceived presence to other people."

"Being transgender, it feels like I'm an outcast and it makes me feel like I'm not living the correct life. As a result, it's difficult to be happy."

"My sexuality is complicated, for right now, I am out as a lesbian... but my mom doesn't know and some of my extended family which I feel, affects me even today with stress and having to be extra cautious about social media, etc."

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MYRIAD OF INTERSECTING STRUGGLES

The overlapping dimensions of race, gender, socioeconomic status, and more create a complex landscape where students must navigate multiple layers of discrimination and barriers to success. Stories demonstrate how students grapple with cultural nuances surrounding mental health, the weight of limited self-expression and high expectations, and alienation and struggle to find happiness in a society that imposes narrow definitions of a "correct" life.

"Being from an immigrant background, talking about mental illness in non-Western ways was difficult and confusing at times. skirting around my father's depression impacted how I saw my own mental health and well-being. but also - productivity culture of being an immigrant in a white dominant high school. There are many intersecting avenues that come into play in my own life and with mental health.

"As a Latinx, first-generation and low-income student, I do not have access to mental health services the same way my peers do."

"I also struggle to truly express myself as a black/hispanic woman, sometimes I feel like being my true self is too much for others and it's tiring on my mental health to have to limit myself and think so much about my perceived presence to other people."

"Being Black and a scholarship student at school, I feel that there is not enough room to make a mistake academically. If I fail, I feel that I would fail through my identity of being Black and fail to live up to the standard of my scholarship requirements."

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EMPOWERMENT AND RESILIENCE

Amidst the challenges, student identities also serve as sources of empowerment and resilience. Encounters with adversity and discrimination can ignite a powerful motivation to thrive. For some, these experiences propel students to embrace their true selves, challenge stereotypes, and pursue their dreams.

"When I was in high school, a teacher told me I wasn't going anywhere because of who I was. Hispanic women that spoke Spanish would only hold me back. Those words changed my life forever because I kept fighting and talking in Spanish. Those words are my motivation to thrive."

"I think being an Asian woman drives me to be in the field of Psychology and the desire to destigmatize mental health in the community. Therefore, I want my mental health and well-being to exemplify what I would like others to feel."

"I was bullied as a high school student, and I have gone through a lot of tough experiences in the past. These helped me to gain resilience and become confident in who I am as an individual."

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(NON)-AFFIRMATION

Students reveal the effects of affirmation and non-affirmation of identity on their mental health. They highlight the struggles faced by marginalized individuals in finding acceptance and safe spaces, while also emphasizing the importance of tailored programs and holistic support to address their unique needs.

My identities leave me more vulnerable to isolation in the south. Lack of safe spaces, struggles to present the way I want to, misgendering, etc. all contribute to a low self-image.

My well-being is something NO ONE cares about and it's really hard to fight for yourself all the time just to have basic needs such as stable housing, people can only take so much.

"I think about my identities and how they were at play with other students and how the professor did or did not make space for those identities in that classroom. Like in a STEM math class I felt like I was being stalked, I felt like I was being harassed because I was a female of color and these guys were fetishizing me and exoticizing me and I felt really, really unsafe in that space."

"Some people describe college as the best time of their lives, that's a privilege I wish I had...but this system actively works on the emotional labor of POC and until that changes, mental health accessibility IS racist, inherently."

I have been diagnosed with PTSD from the age of 8 and didn't come from a supportive family, school system, environment, or judicial system. All of the isolation and no actual help has a huge impact on one's ability to be mentally healthy.

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The Difference Maker

Students highly value a supportive campus culture that emphasizes peer support* and the open sharing of experiences. They recognize the importance of active listening, empathy, and creating safe spaces for expression. Students also emphasize the significance of connecting with individuals who share similar experiences and identities.

*We define peer support as the intentional act of an individual showing up in a relational way, offering understanding, empathy, and guidance without imposing power dynamics.

BEYOND THE CLINICAL

LISTENING AND TRUST

MUTUAL RECIPROCITY

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BEYOND THE CLINICAL

Students envision peer support as a transformative practice where individuals come together in a relational way, transcending the traditional boundaries of clinical settings. It is an organic and empowering process that goes beyond the confines of professional expertise and formal therapy highlighting the importance of being open about one's experiences and sharing them with others. At the same time, students also question whether institutional support may be disconnected from students' experiences.

"I do think that they're [institutional and peer support] both important and they're both necessary."
"It's more about me, connecting with this student or that student and us being in the same boat in some ways...it feels really life-giving, beautiful, loving and healing. It's like swimming for islands of hope, swimming for pockets of joy, of love, and like you, you gotta swim for those. You gotta struggle almost for those and not in a, I don't know, necessarily positive way."

"If you create a campus culture that encourages support, you would see more peer support on your campus."

"Some people that work with the institution may forget what it is like to be a student, and so their answers or their recommendations may be completely different from what a current student is facing."

"I think that a lot of the time, we need both. This institution, for this thing, for when it's too intense, or like, this person is too far gone then we send them to the institution, and then peer support is for everything else."

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LISTENING AND TRUST

Students emphasize that peer support involves active listening, empathy, and creating a safe space for students to express themselves without judgment. It encompasses deep involvement in students' experiences, offering emotional support, and providing guidance to better their lives. Students characterize peer support by having a circle of dependable friends who can be relied upon without being prompted. It includes regular check-ins and being there for each other during challenging times.

"Being affirmed, getting to express yourself without feeling judged and having someone truly listen and not put their own feelings on yours."

"Having a circle of people that you can depend on that can check in on you and each other without being prompted."

"Peer support means having a community of people in your same learning or working environment who embrace one another and can be there when you need a helping hand."

"I think that [students] shouldn't have to worry if they're gonna be scrutinized or I guess viewed as less than human for who they are, whether it be because of their race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, anything like that."

"Peer support means openness, active listening, and radical understanding by people who are in similar situations and occupy positions of trust in my life."

"Giving me someone who will listen to me and guide me to better my own life. This could be advice or just an open ear so I can get out the feelings inside."

"Having friends around you that you feel comfortable enough to reach out to during rough times. These are people who will not treat you like a burden. They genuinely care about you and want to help you with your issues."

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MUTUAL RECIPROCITY

Students emphasize that peer support thrives on mutual relationships, non-professional assistance, and personal growth. It extends beyond academic support to encompass mental and physical well-being, with friends, colleagues, and others providing guidance and resources.

"But what that's created for me is a sense of mutual aid and solidarity, with my friends, with my peers, and with my community, so for me, that community has supported me through a lot of really difficult times and I would not be where I am today without a lot of those members of the community."

"I think that relationality is the key part of it. Like we are sitting here together, like me and this person, that I'm engaging in care and it feels radical. It feels like we are not participating in certain systems that are designed to break us down."

"It makes me feel really proud of myself and of my community to know that we have that shared relationship, where I can give them a hand and they can give me a hand as needed. It's not something we think about doing, we just do it because we value our community."

"Peer support has to go both ways. It has to be a mutual relationship, where you're both contributing to supporting each other."

"Peer support is when I'm reaching out to my friends about mental health and well-being. This could be checking in to see if they've eaten or hydrated, supporting them with time management, dealing with grief, relationship issues. Often it's really like lending an ear to a friend I really care about and creating a safe space for them to express what they're experiencing."

Whose Responsibility?
Student Insights Signal Answers Must Come From Everywhere

Whose Responsibility? Student Insights Signal Answers Must Come From Everywhere

Limited resources to perceptions that mental health and wellbeing falls outside the scope of higher education's primary mission, to a lack awareness or understanding of the significant impact of mental health on student well-being and academic success, to societal stigmas around mental health issues, all influence institutional attitudes about student success.

Students however are not looking for their college to solve their problems but rather support them. Thus answers – whether formal or informal - must come from everywhere.

In this section, we offer student-inspired ways for individuals to better support themselves, communities to better support each other, and institutions to better support the people they serve.

**As a person,
what can I do?**

**As a community,
what can we do?**

**As an institution,
what can it do?**

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Examine Natural Dualities of Perception and Experience

Binary thinking's tendency is to perceive and categorize mental health experiences and conditions in rigid, dichotomous terms leading to oversimplification and stigmatization of mental health issues as well as a lack of understanding and empathy. Many students embrace a more nuanced and inclusive approach that "tunes in" to the diverse range of experiences and challenges faced by each person leading to greater empathy, understanding, and a stronger sense of community.

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Students reflect and explore what it means to be mentally healthy.

I Pursue

Embrace imperfect excellence to preserve senses of self-worth and prioritize overall well-being

I Seek

Explore the threshold of abundance and enoughness to cultivate a sense of fulfillment and embrace self-acceptance,
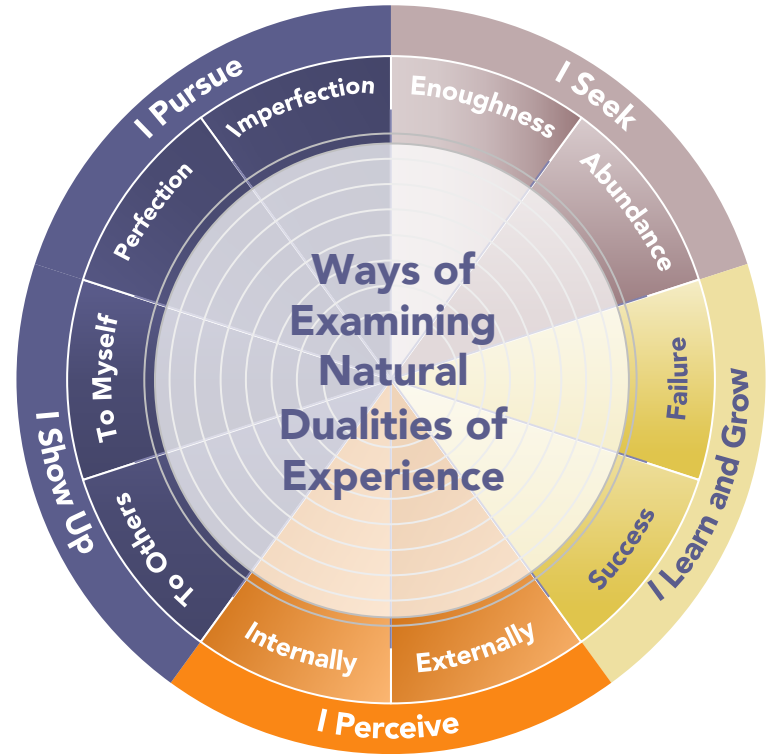
I Learn and Grow

View setbacks and failures as milestones to growth, not personal inadequacy.

I Perceive

Empower the inner voice to transcend and challenge internalized sociocultural beliefs, expectations, and norms.

I Show Up

Nurture personal well-being to honor worth and sustain ability to support and contribute to others.

Ways of Examining Natural Dualities of Experience

I Pursue — Imperfection — Perfection
I Seek — Enoughness — Abundance
I Learn and Grow — Failure — Success
I Perceive — Internally — Externally
I Show Up — To Myself — To Others

Nurture Student Mental Health Pods

When asked to represent crucial people, resources, and support systems, students painted an elaborate portrait of care which delivers emotional support, practical assistance, or access to mental health services. Mapping out these community connections can help students understand and visualize their support systems, identify gaps or areas where additional support may be needed, and facilitate communication and collaboration among the different members of their mental health "pod." In this fashion, community member roles would change based on their positionality within a particular student's pod.

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The Power of Supportive Relationships in College

By mapping their mental health pod, students can gain a clearer understanding of the social networks that contribute to their well-being and develop strategies to strengthen and expand their support systems. It can also help them navigate their mental health journey, access appropriate resources, and cultivate a sense of belonging and community.

1
Emotional Support and Motivation from Friends

2
Guidance and Opportunities from Professors

3
Belonging and Empowerment in a Close-Knit Community

4
Collaboration and Camaraderie through Group Projects

5
Unwavering Support from Family

6
Personal Growth through Mentorship

7
Friendships and Passionate Connections in Extracurricular Activities

8
Reliable Friends During Challenging Times

9
Networking and Professional Opportunities through Like-Minded Individuals

10
Unexpected Support and Positive Ripple Effects

The 10 "pod-mates" represented here reflect a synthesis of student responses to a workshop activity.

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Build and Support Intersective Communities

The intersection of identity and peer support provides a solid foundation for students to navigate the complexities of their well-being. Adopting a set of community engagement principles within the context of peer support (both formal and informal) allows colleges and universities to foster an environment where students' multifaceted identities are affirmed, power dynamics are addressed, tailored support is provided, and student agency is empowered.

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Engagement Principles to Support the Intersection of Identity and Peer Support

AFFIRM ALL

Acknowledge the multiplicity of identities to create a sense of belonging and ensure that everyone's experiences are valued and respected.

Encourage student agency, participation, and leadership, allowing students to influence and shape the design and delivery of support initiatives.

STUDENT FORGED
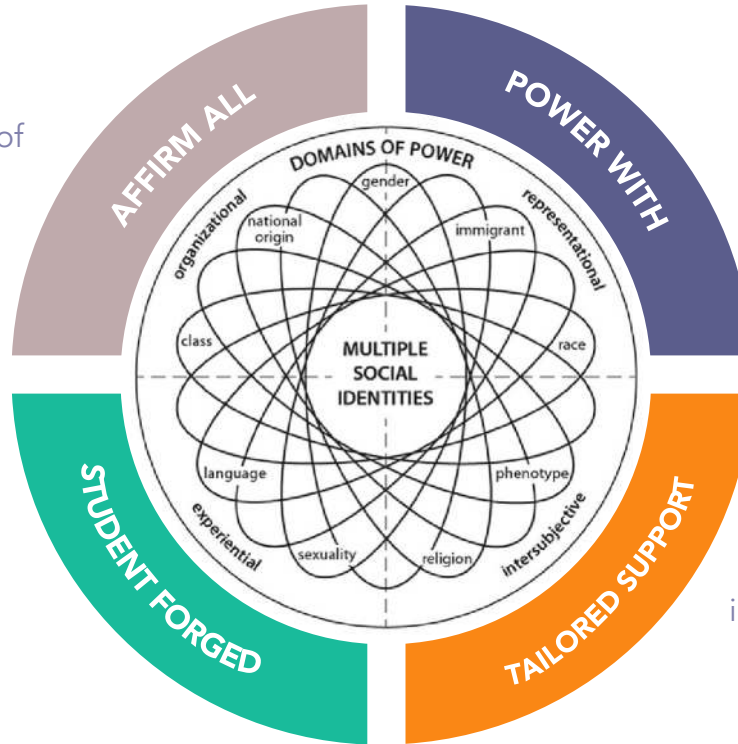
POWER WITH

Create spaces that offer courage-based, power-with dynamics to foster equity and empowerment.

Provide resources and interventions that consider the unique challenges faced by individuals at the intersections of multiple identities.

TAILORED SUPPORT

AFFIRM ALL
POWER WITH
STUDENT FORGED
TAILORED SUPPORT

DOMAINS OF POWER

MULTIPLE SOCIAL IDENTITIES

gender, representational, immigrant, race, phenotype, intersubjective, religion, sexuality, experiential, language, class, organizational, national origin

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Leaning Into Student Voice
A Call to Action from Today's Students

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A Call to Action from Today's Students

Pre-COVID, anxiety and depression were prevalent mental health concerns among college students, with high percentages experiencing overwhelming anxiety (63%) and depression (45%).* While students from diverse backgrounds are employing various coping strategies, as educators, we need to assess whether we are aiding or impeding their well-being.

Our research emphasizes the need to think beyond coping strategies and clinical outcomes. This type of thinking currently pervades higher education and while necessary to a point, we view it as short-sighted and detrimental to both the health and well-being of students and communities at large. Given the complex ecosystem we're working in, it is important to acknowledge how students are being impacted by a myriad of factors. Inevitably, each student will respond differently based on their identities and lived experiences. What that means is we need to create pathways for students that allow for agency, autonomy, and self-determination to nurture their health and well-being. This seems like a daunting task because of its

its complexities, but it requires us to be aware of our own positionality and assume shared responsibility for collective wellbeing. And it involves supporting and valuing a wider range of student achievements and aspirations while fostering a closer-knit community of collaboration among students, mentors, faculty, professional staff, and families who uplift and support each other.

Bottom line: How we view, and measure student success must change. Institutions must lead the way in redefining its criteria by incorporating essential elements of self-care and community care in service of happier and healthier students and flourishing campus communities. It's what the world is asking of higher education today.

So, we end with two questions: What if mental health was elevated to the same status as academic and career pursuits? And what might a campus community full of "mentally healthy" students be capable of?

Source: American College Health Association, 2019

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Appendix

1. Background

2. Approach and Agenda,
   Philosophy and Methodology,
   Safe Harbor Statement

3. Student Metaphors for
   Maintaining Mental Health

4. About Kinetic Seeds

5. How to Credit this Work

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01 Project Background

Over the years, scholars have observed a significant increase in college students reporting mental health challenges (Lipson et al., 2018). This is due to a myriad of internal and external factors that impact students' personal, cultural, educational, and professional goals and lifestyles. Mental health experts note that even before the pandemic, rates of anxiety and depression among students have been steadily rising. Unfortunately, approximately 75% of students are not able to access the appropriate resources due to the mismatch between students' demand for services and the capacity of campuses (Mayo Clinic Health System, 2021; Novotney, 2014).

While this issue is gaining more attention across the nation, it's clear there is no silver bullet and solutions will require an ecosystem approach. It will require seeing beyond one's role, team, or department. It will require connecting and coordinating a wide range of stakeholders invested in helping students access high-quality mental health services and improve their mental well-being. Students are one of those stakeholder groups and they have a critical role to play in this effort.

Within this backdrop, Kinetic Seeds developed an avenue of inquiry (see page 38) that flipped the expert role and sought expert insight from young people who have been the ones normalizing conversations about mental health.

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02a Approach and Agenda

Real, Human, Emotional, Immersive Connection

Kinetic Seeds' immersive and collaborative approach to qualitative research draws inspiration from reflective practices and in-relations knowledge systems.

We seek to develop a deep understanding of the interconnectedness of people, emphasizing the importance of building trust and fostering a reciprocal relationship between the researcher and the participant.

Through this approach, insights and understanding are developed collaboratively, and the research process is characterized by mutual learning and growth.

Student

What does it mean to be "mentally healthy" and how do you know when you are? How do you cope when you're not? How do you nurture yourself?

Institution

What would a nurturing school environment look like? What would a campus culture without mental health stigmas look like? How would your student experience improve if your mental health was nurtured in a way that worked for you?

Community

What might a community full of "mentally healthy" people be capable of? What do their lives look like functioning around one another?

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02b Our Philosophy to Student Engagement*

Students' expression of their experiences, opinions, thoughts, ideas, and feedback relating to their educational journey.

In and out of classroom experiences and opportunities that increase learning and development.[8]

Institutional transformation is the product of decision-making, which is guided by (in)formal, explicit and implicit values, preferences, and priorities.[1] The process involves multiple stakeholders gathering information, assessing options, and selecting a course of action.

STUDENT VOICE

NEXUS

STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

DECISION MAKING
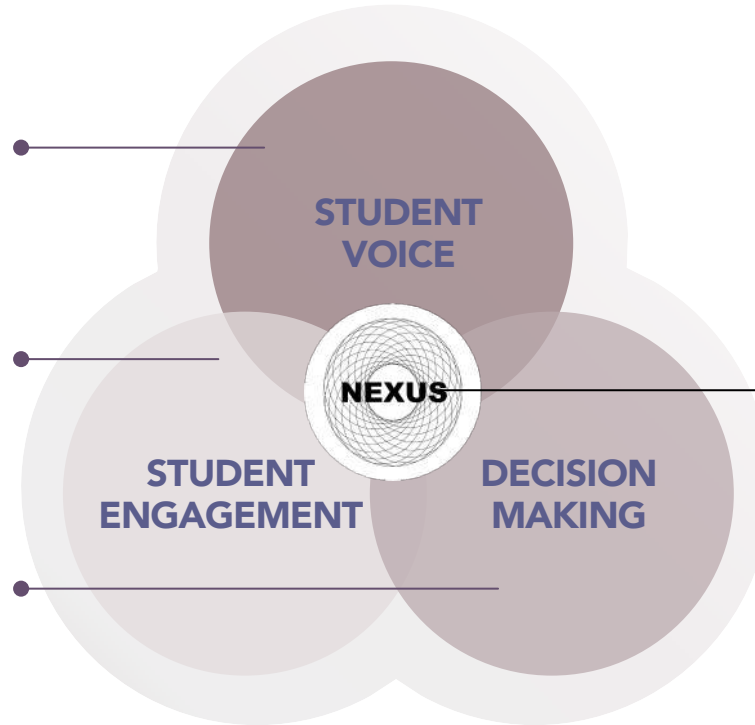
To strengthen student voice and engagement in service of institutional transformation, higher education professionals must **shift power by intentionally collaborating and power sharing with students,** so that together they can learn, interrogate, examine, design, decide, and implement changes that advance equity and student success.[2] This cannot be an "add-on" to existing strategies. It must be a throughline in all approaches to institutional transformation.

1. Kuh, 2009; Lawson & Lawson, 2013
2. Posselt et al., 2020

*Flanagan, C., & Dixon, J. (2022, August). *Shift Power. Share Power. An engagement framework for transformational change with and for today's new majority learners.*

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02c Research Methods

Our mixed-method plan included:

Survey
From multiple dimensions (personal, collective, societal) we created a baseline understanding of student views related to how they engage within their college journey. Findings were used to inform a qualitative focus group protocol and activity set.

1:1 Interview
One-hour interviews designed to enrich survey findings and uncover additional elements and attributes of student mental health and well-being.

Liberatory Design Studio
We invited students to a liberatory design retreat to refine and reflect on our findings as well as brainstorm within a set of opportunity spaces. Through dialogue and hands-on design application we identified ways to strengthen mental health and well-being.

Separate stipends were provided to students for their participation in the survey, focus group, and design workshop.

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02d Student Safe Harbor Statement

1) We take our creativity and imaginations seriously.

2) We dream together, not in isolation, in community.

3) We create intentional space for chaos and embracing it is an essential process to engage in liberatory dreaming.

4) We emphasize building authentic relationships with each other and listening with all senses of the body and the mind.

5) We learn to get intimate with the unknown, our doubts and fears, our privileges, our restlessness, and fragility.

6) We practice and meditate on love to grow our collective resilience, to go deeper, be more vulnerable, and more empathetic.

7) We engage in healing behavior, noticing possibility and wholeness, paying attention to what requires nourishment and love.

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03 Student Metaphors

We asked students to fill in the blank about maintaining mental health through the lens of a metaphor: *"Maintaining my mental health is like…"* Overall, answers collectively convey the dynamic, individualized, and proactive nature of maintaining mental health. It is not a one-time achievement but rather a lifelong journey that involves self-reflection, adjustment, and seeking support when needed.

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....it's like tuning an instrument based on the surroundings. It can go flat or go sharp. It's a constant everyday thing of checking in and making it more of how I want, this way or that.

....it's like a logic puzzle, because it constantly changes in different scenarios. Different points in life require different methods of care and what worked last week or last year might not work today.
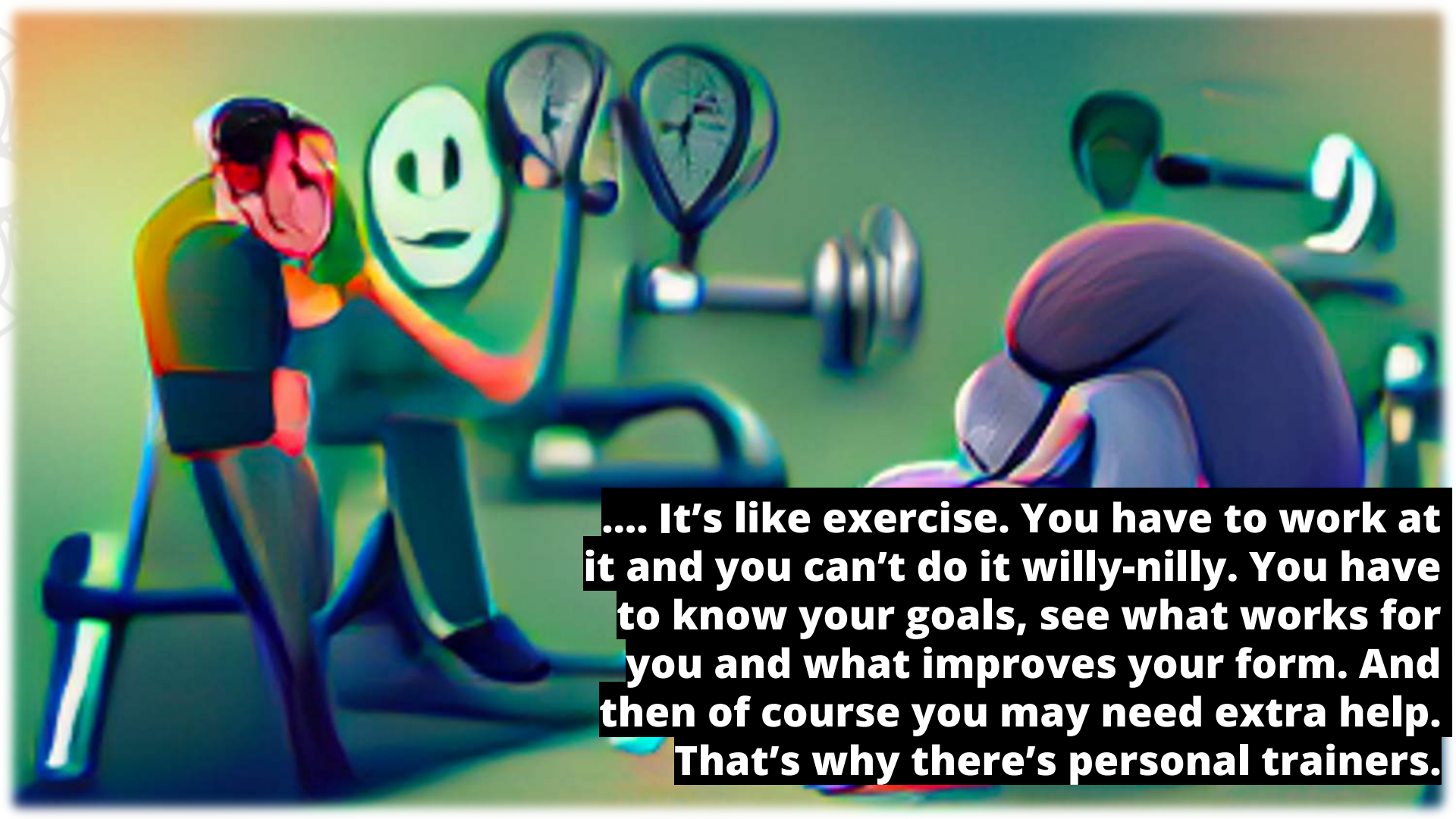
.... It's like exercise. You have to work at it and you can't do it willy-nilly. You have to know your goals, see what works for you and what improves your form. And then of course you may need extra help. That's why there's personal trainers.
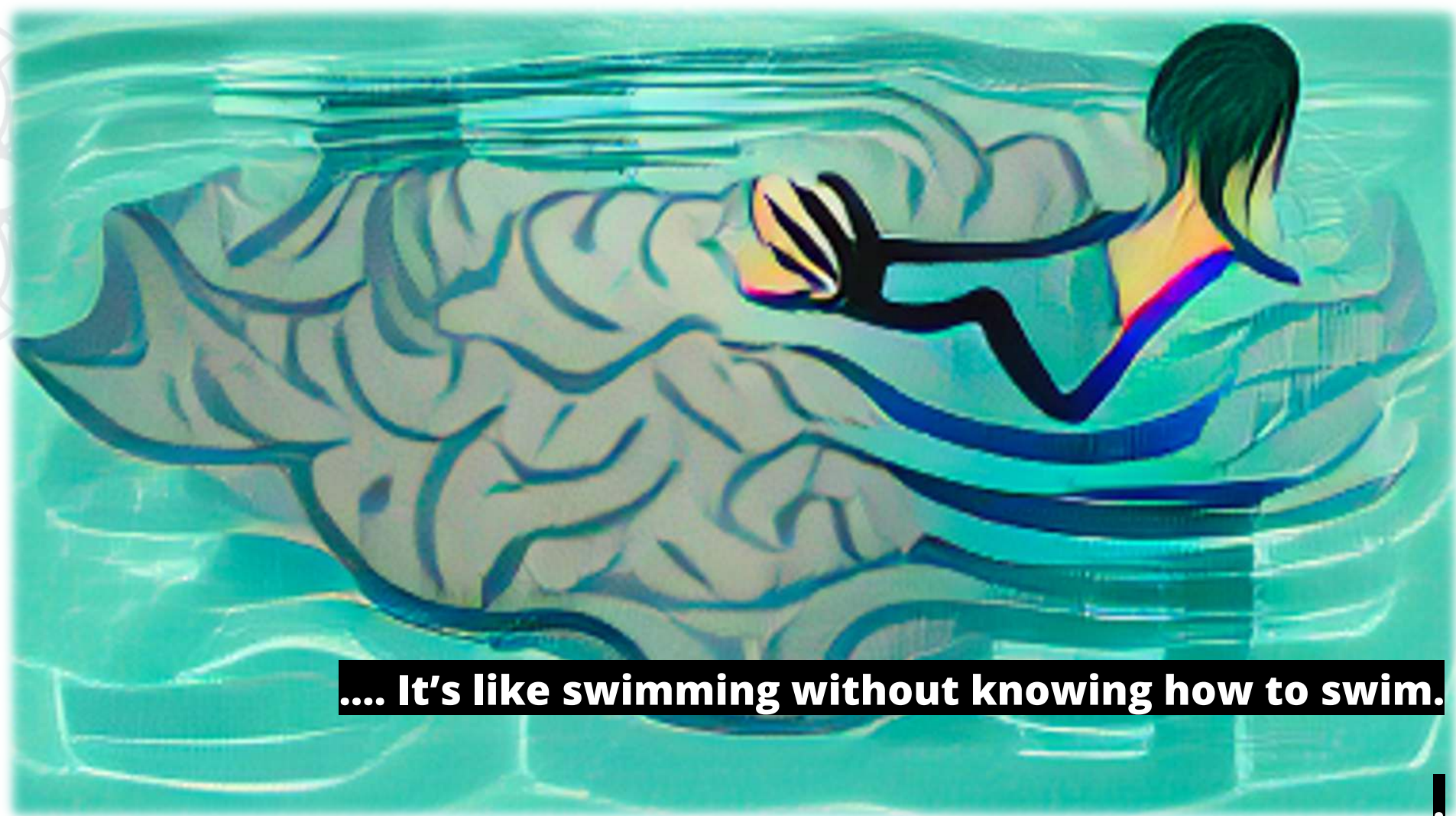
.... it's like a tennis match of constantly lobbying something back and forth. And sometimes you just wanna hit it in the stands.

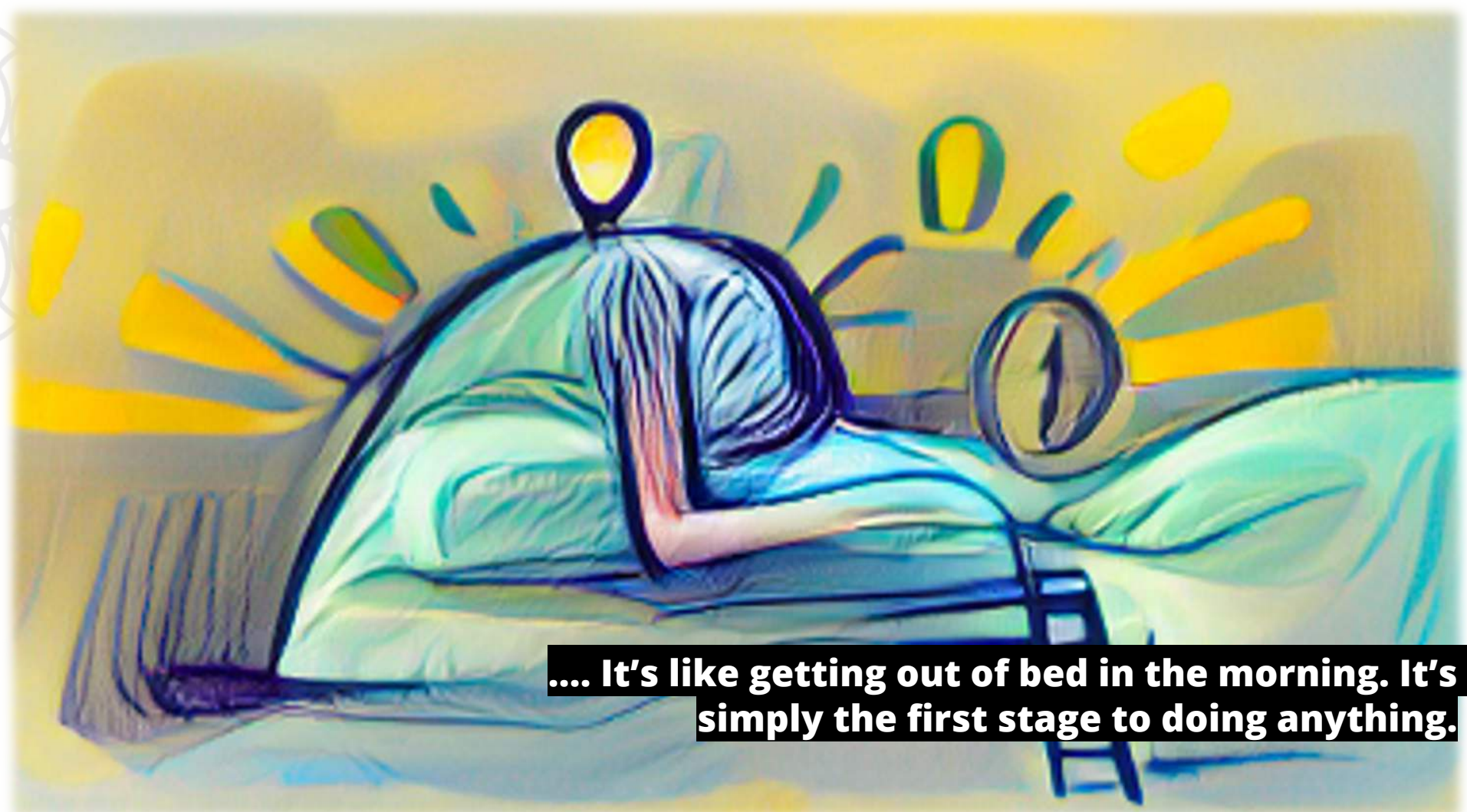....it's is like being able to recognize the bad things so that you can make it better.
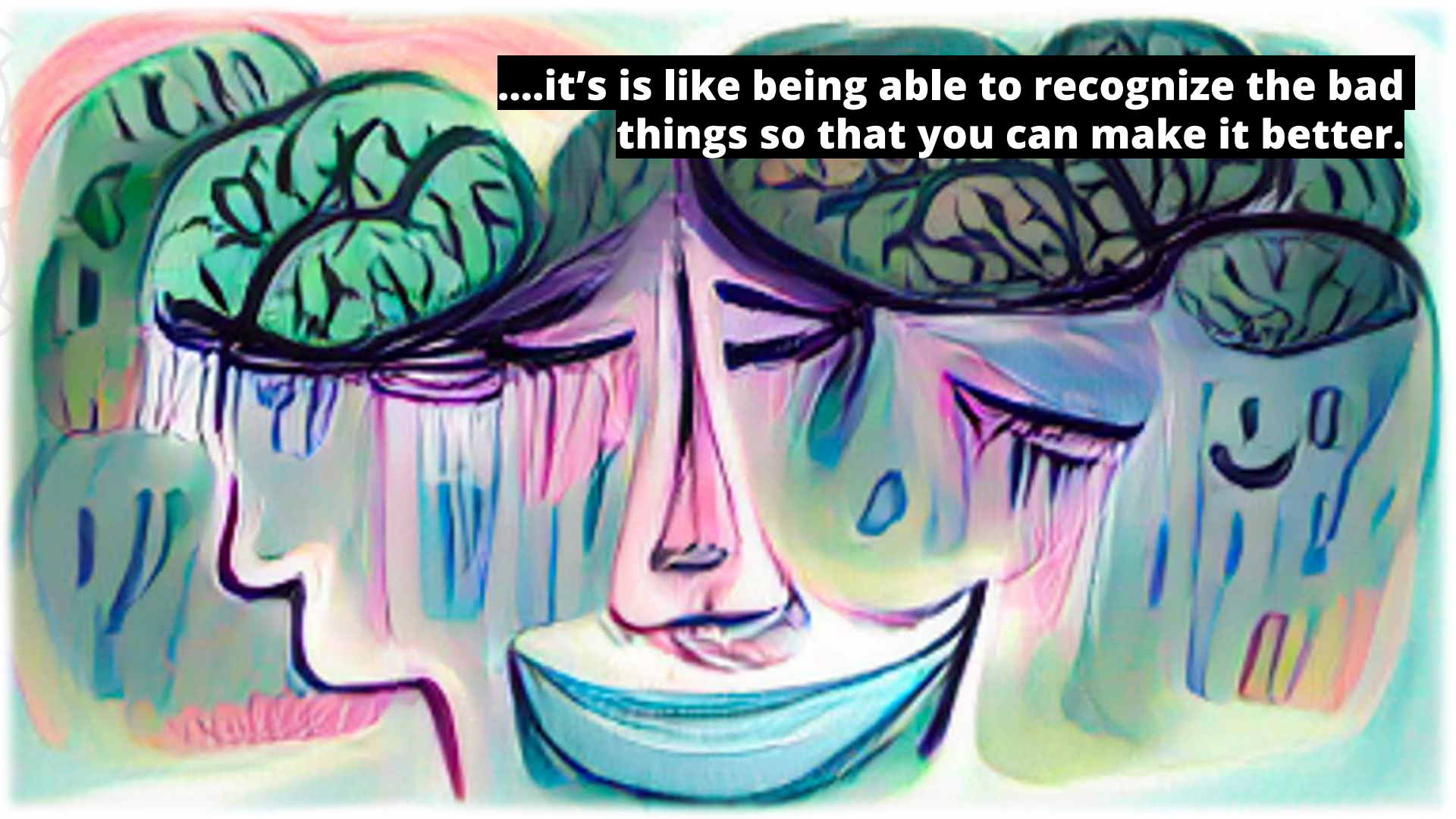
.... It's like swimming without knowing how to swim.

.... It's like working a job you didn't apply for.

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.... It's like getting out of bed in the morning. It's simply the first stage to doing anything.

04 About Kinetic Seeds

Working at the intersection of innovation and behavior change, Kinetic Seeds is a design consultancy tackling complex educational challenges. Our approach is to unearth powerful insights and opportunities generated by design-thinking methodologies and translate them into new and engaging student experiences.

Woven into our DNA is the belief that students' voices can be instruments of meaningful, lasting change. Our process constructs new spaces within which we (students, learners, educators, advocates, leaders, policymakers and others) can make meaning together. Where we can be attentive and open with one another in ways that encourage our mutual responsibility for the quality and dignity of our lives. Our expertise engaging students has supported a full range of stakeholder efforts – from institutions to state systems – to lift-up student voice and more assuredly address challenges in the education ecosystem.

We purposefully seek out and work with partners who believe diversity is part of our unique social fabric and key to human flourishing and who are committed to rolling up their sleeves to consciously "design out" the inequities baked into our systems and structures.

For more information, visit www.kineticseeds.com

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05 How to Credit This Work

We hope *Beyond Survival* supports you to incorporate in your own work essential elements of self-care and community care in service of happier and healthier students and flourishing campus communities. To honor the co-creators, please use this language:

"With funding from Lumina Foundation, *Beyond Survival* is the result of a collaboration between Kinetic Seeds [Christine Flanagan and sahibzada mayed] and thirty-one U.S. college students."

When referencing the work in a citation, please use the following format:

"Flanagan, C., & mayed, s. (2023, June). *Beyond Survival: Toward Affirming, Dignifying and Humanizing Student Outcomes*"

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