PLEASE MIND THE TRUST GAP
Insights and Opportunities from Today's Student Experience Lab
September 2022
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kinetic seeds

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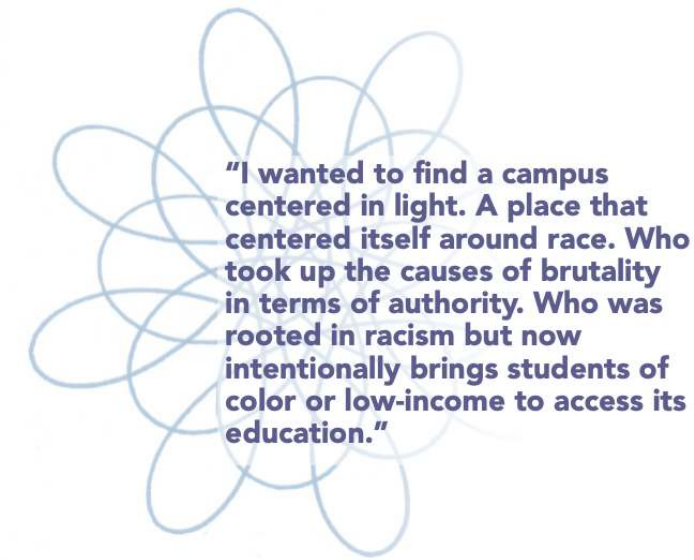
APPRECIATION AND GRATITUDE

Without students, there is no system to trust



Kinetic Seeds' approach to strengthening student voice and engagement in higher education constructs new spaces within which students, learners, educators, advocates, leaders, policymakers, and others can make meaning together. By being attentive and open with one another in ways that encourage our mutual responsibility for the quality and dignity of our lives, true and genuine connection occurs.

We gratefully acknowledge Lumina Foundation for sponsoring this work. We express our gratitude to organizational partners LEDA Scholars, Campus Compact, Veteran's Education Success, NASPA, UAspire, and Higher Learning Advocates. Without your student recruitment support and belief in the power of student voice, this work would not have been possible.

And finally, to the 51 students who gave so generously of their time and experience – we say thank you. We believe you hold the answers to much of what needs fixing within the system of higher education. As role models and change-makers, you taught us much about how to be accomplices[1] for equity as well as 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 demonstrations such as this when student voice and engagement in higher education transformation takes hold.

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1 For more information visit: https://www.ywcaworks.org/blogs/ywca/tue-12212021-1103/whats-difference-between-ally-and-accomplice

FUTURE PROLOGUE

Trust in higher education and its effect on today's students

All students should have access to high-quality educational pathways they want and deserve. But do they trust the system to provide it? There is strong evidence to the contrary.

According to a recent survey[2] that measured public trust in the top 135 doctoral research universities, about 35 percent of adult members of Generation Z said they tended not to trust higher education while 41 percent said they tended to trust colleges and universities. Among the four generation groups, those ages 18-25 were the least likely to trust higher education.

At the same time, people of color also have expressed their mistrust in higher education systems. A report from the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University[3] found that Black undergraduates trust college leaders significantly less than their white peers. Report co-author Shannon Calderone, a professor of educational leadership at Washington State University said the findings about Black students' lack of trust "speaks to the alienation and lack of sense of belonging" historically felt by students of color at colleges.

Within this backdrop, Kinetic Seeds, in the summer of 2022, gathered a group of today's students to explore:

1. The dimensions of trust (or mistrust) between students and institutions, and how trust affects the value of an education beyond high school.
2. The nexus of race, education, and the economy through the lens of trust.
3. The realities of how higher education either won, violated, or lost the trust of students.
4. Long-standing power differentials and alienation patterns that exist within racially marginalized communities.

Our research included a foundation-setting survey to understand the multiple dimensions of trust (personal, collective, societal) and 1:1 interviews to gain an understanding of the situations in which students individually perceive, understand, and find meaning within this avenue of inquiry. We ended with a participatory design studio that brought students and stakeholders together to refine and reflect on findings as well as brainstorm ideas within a set of opportunity spaces.

Designed for institutional and organizational leaders and decisionmakers, this report offers both a reflection of the realities of students' lived experiences and an instigation to us all to consider what the renewal of trust could be. Let's get started.

[2] *Most Trusted Universities*, Morning Consult, 2022.

[3] *A Racial Trust Deficit in Higher Ed*, Inside Higher Ed, Feb., 26,

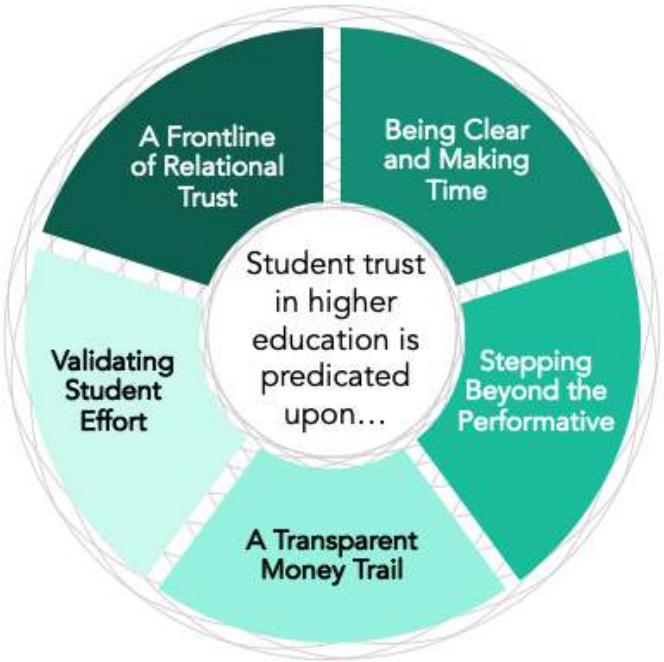
WHAT DID WE LEARN?

INSIGHTS FROM THE FIELD

Trust is at the foundation of healthy relationships. At its core, trust is a "*firm belief in the reliability, honesty, integrity, or strength of someone or something.*" It is an expectation that two parties will act in a way that is mutually beneficial. For these reasons, trust is a key element of effective communication, teamwork, commitment, and productivity. When present, it leads to stronger relationships and healthier cultures.

Because of the inherent vulnerability involved in trusting relationships, it is widely understood that trust must be earned. In some instances, it can be hard to build and sustain because people may not be aware of the unintentional ways that they have broken trust.

Within this research, we learned that students have high expectations of their respective institutions. But do these expectations match reality? In many cases, the answer is no which plays a profound role in how and where students trust their institution, and the people within it. Exploring ways in which trust can be built (or rebuilt) can help faculty, staff, and leaders create stronger relationships and healthier cultures that lead to thriving student experiences and equitable outcomes. What follows are five such insights that reveal – according to today's students – what their trust is predicated upon.



"My university as a name may not be something that I can trust, but I've had several phenomenal experiences with professors...with the multicultural student association, as small as it may be. I have found my people on campus that have provided me with opportunity. And when I needed things from them, they were able to follow through and they were able to help me create a platform for myself, where I could be myself."

INSIGHT 01 | TRUST IS PREDICATED UPON

A FRONTLINE OF RELATIONAL TRUST

Students are building relationships with people at their institutions who share similar identities and experiences all the time. These relationships are critical connections within their social support networks. Many said they relate better to staff members outside of leadership and senior administration. Some discussed trusting individuals and certain departments or offices on campus yet felt differently about the institution. As such, the significance of making intentional space for students to engage on their own terms and within supportive structures and resources should not be underestimated. For this reason, across the student cohort, calls were made for more diverse representation in faculty and staff, which many felt would help alleviate their concerns around formal and informal student support.

TAKEAWAY

Relational trust is dynamic, contextual, and built through consistent social exchanges. With it, students' agency and autonomy are nurtured and possibilities present themselves in powerful ways.

"I feel like I had pretty good trust with staff members just because ***we were kind of in similar positions like staff didn't have a lot of power in the whole hierarchy,*** *and students also didn't really have a lot of power, even though we're always told that we have a lot of power."*

*"****We need to see people that look like us****, that are for us, that are helping us to get to where we need to go."*

"And so, ***those are all women of color, women who have similar backgrounds like me,*** *and people that I've been able to find that I trust because of their experiences."*

*"I've definitely felt a lot of support from the multicultural office****. It's a space where I feel like I can just come in and be myself****…mainly just because they're meeting me where I am."*

INSIGHT 02 | BEING CLEAR AND MAKING TIME

"It's kind of like that thing where their decision-making is very ignorant. And then the solution is just a Band-Aid and then, when you try to bring it up, it's just like you're yelling into a blackhole and nothing comes up."

INSIGHT 02 | TRUST IS PREDICATED UPON

BEING CLEAR AND MAKING TIME

Students in this research are aware that decisions are being made on a regular basis, but often, they are not able to understand the reasoning behind them. Students yearn for college decision makers to be available, make the time, and take a genuine interest in sharing, listening intentionally for feedback, and bringing students into the decision-making process. When it happens, students feel extraordinarily supported and are more willing to return the support when called upon. Several students noted how often action taken by institutions failed to address the underlying systemic issues. Many expressed how their voices were not being heard and what they advocated for was ignored and neglected at the hands of differing institutional priorities.

TAKEAWAY

While they often can't see it, students know decisions are being made on a regular basis. While action is being taken on both sides, the question of where efforts might overlap, come together, and coalesce, should be examined, and made known.

"I felt like I had to make a place or a space for myself [with my project]. ***They've actually been overwhelmingly supportive. They've been a part of it.*** *The chancellor came to the unveiling event and said a few words. Faculty want to be a part of it. I haven't met any pushback yet."*

"But ***the reality is they're not listening to us****. It doesn't matter if you have a student work on a commission. If there's still power dynamics, we're not going to get our voices out."*

"Staying accountable is one thing, because it's easy to go on social media and repost a post that says like 'this is wrong and this shouldn't be accepted.' But it's another thing to really take action and work towards that change. It's ***like really being genuine about the work that you're doing and also investing your time.****"*

INSIGHT 03 | A TRANSPARENT MONEY TRAIL

"It's very accessible to get funding as an affinity group but when you compare that to the way that athletic clubs are valued or other groups on campus, I feel like that's very telling of the story that you prioritize athletic funding compared to your funding that you claim toward anti-racism as your priority."

INSIGHT 03 | TRUST IS PREDICATED UPON

A TRANSPARENT MONEY TRAIL

Students play an active role in maintaining the progress of higher education institutions and thus, should have a genuine voice in ensuring that institutional agendas reflect their needs and experiences. Whether it is due to a failure to adequately invest in resources that address students' needs or lack of sustained action to give back to communities they are embedded in, institutions lose trust from students as their priorities appear to align with making profits. When thinking of the "money trail" students want to be engaged as informed participants in decision-making processes.

TAKEAWAY

The perceived business of higher education and the allocation of resources are often in conflict with students' requests for change. A shared understanding of financial matters and how they fit within institutional priorities may alleviate mistrust.

But I think it's just so frustrating because ***you know what we need but you're not willing to invest that to help students like us thrive****. You are okay with us just surviving; you don't want us to thrive. That's how I feel like money talks, and it really shows what an institution cares about."*

"We're **trying to figure out different ways to work with administration, to figure out ways that students get a voice in different rooms, at different tables***. It's been an interesting experience, sort of a microcosm of life in general."*

"Bring students into the conversation, **open forums where students are informed about where their money goes***, seek students with the least resources and provide equitable solutions."*

*"***It's just changed so much to the point where it's all about money.** *It's all about business, and so these schools aren't willing to do anything for the community unless it's making them money in some way."*

INSIGHT 04 | STEPPING BEYOND THE PERFORMATIVE

"I don't go to my college's flagship campus. I'm in the local community. Most [residents] are African American and Latino. I see the college engaged in creating pathways for students and getting them into college on a full-rate scholarship. This institution isn't just taking from the city in terms of land or revenue. They are investing back. That's how I measured my initial trust meter."

INSIGHT 04 | TRUST IS PREDICATED UPON

STEPPING BEYOND THE PERFORMATIVE

Frustrations abounded as students reflected on their institution's inability to adequately follow through and prioritize students' needs. Some shared how a lack of accountability contributes to feelings of performativity. Others expressed how intended action felt hypocritical as their respective institutions either failed to act on what they claimed to support or failed to address underlying systemic issues. Students also discussed existing power differentials and how equity work requires institutions to pay attention to what marginalized students are experiencing and advocating for. Generally, students felt that showing intentional support and active allyship could help alleviate feelings of performativity.

TAKEAWAY

For many, demonstrations of decision-maker engagement with what matters to students feels like a box being checked. Hollow attempts that may reflect solidarity but don't follow-through with action. For some, genuine allyship does exist, offering guideposts for how other institutions can step into trust-building.

*"It's interesting that a university, such as mine, is **saying we love social justice**. We're passionate about educating our students for social justice; you have to take these classes that are so specific about social justice. **But we can't even say Black Lives Matter, and here we are taking down a Black Lives Matter flag**. It's definitely hypocritical to see that."*

"I feel like a lot of this DEI stuff to make education more accessible is being done because DEI is more of a trend than people actually, genuinely, care about it. That's what I mean by performativity."

*"My school does a good job of providing **lots of service opportunities to actually engage in creating community bridges**. And they are doing it in a way that doesn't give off that, you know, quote unquote, white savior energy, which I think is a very powerful thing and an important difference to be made."*

INSIGHT 05 | VALIDATING STUDENT EFFORT

"The work I'm doing on campus is very social-justice oriented and advocacy-based, and it doesn't just end with me. Nor did it just start with me. I'm just continuing something that needs to continue and will continue for generations until the changes that we seek become normal and they're embedded within our society. These aren't rights that we should be fighting for, because these are basic human rights, they should already have been granted to us, the second that we took a breath here."

INSIGHT 05 | TRUST IS PREDICATED UPON

VALIDATING STUDENT EFFORT

Most of the students in this research cohort are involved in and/or leading efforts to advance social justice. Having to navigate the complexities of these change-making efforts however takes a toll. Many spoke of their efforts not recognized or credited while others experienced burnout.

Whether through lack of recognition or compensation, being pulled into *"free, emotional labor,"* or being burned out due to persistent efforts to bring about meaningful change, many students shared experiences of feeling invalidated, exploited, and ignored at the hands of their respective institutions. One student expressed how institutional frameworks, as a baseline, are failing to *"acknowledge students' work worthy of compensation."* Another student shared how *"currently, students from marginalized backgrounds have a higher chance of being burnt out as they take on emotional and free labor on top of their responsibilities."*

TAKEAWAY

Student advocacy is alive and well. Calls for changes in everything from improved student experiences to advancing social justice. Yet for many, these efforts are underappreciated and neglected. Some feel shut down while others turn to opting out because of burnout.

"There's ***a lot of people who are putting in like free emotional labor*** *and they don't get recognized for the work, and I think it's far more than just recognition. They're just doing what administration is supposed to do, like what they get paid to do."*

"[My] project got picked up by someone from facilities ***and, they just put their name all over it and they did whatever they wanted and left the student voices in the dust.*** *I learned that someone who has better resources can take advantage of this project and make it something more realistic,* ***but at the same time it's at the expense of tons and tons of student voices that got ignored."***

"A lot of the admin just sources students of color that they can rely on for anything related to color. We were extremely overworked, but we also had a deep passion to help everyone. It was great, but we were a mess and ***it showed me that administration didn't really appreciate the work that was being done. We didn't get paid for the first year even though we worked 10 hours a week."***

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

LET'S DO SOME FREEDOM DREAMING[4]

"Without new visions we don't know what to build, only what to knock down. We not only end up confused, rudderless, and cynical, but we forget that making a revolution is not a series of clever maneuvers and tactics but a process that can and must transform us." (Kelley 2022)

Using the trust wheel, we asked students to imagine a radical[5] future that embraces their autonomy outside of the systemic constraints of higher education. A future where trust is the currency of transformation. In this future, we asked, what is education for? What does it look and feel like? What needs to change?

We put forward four opportunity spaces for consideration. Framed as "how might we" questions, they ask us to live in the world of possibility. See them as provocations. Let them instigate you to test your current assumptions. Let them guide new thinking about what it means to deliver a trusting, thriving student experience.

OPPORTUNITY SPACES

1. *How might we imagine fair and ethical compensation for student efforts toward institutional, system, and social change?*
2. *How might we reconfigure existing power dynamics and resource flows to increase student agency and authority in decision-making processes?*
3. *How might we cultivate a culture of care and concern that elevates mental health and wellness to the same status as academic pursuits?*
4. *How might we create dignifying and humanizing educational experiences that allow students to thrive and flourish?*

[4] Coined by author and NYU professor of Africana Studies Robin D.G. Kelley, freedom dreaming means **acknowledging and harnessing your own intrinsic power and expertise**. Freedom dreaming is about listening deeply while unlearning harmful ideologies and ideas.

[5] We associate the term radical from the Latin radicalis, meaning "*inherent, forming the root.*"

OPPORTUNITY SPACE 01

How might we imagine fair and ethical compensation for student efforts toward institutional, system, and social change?

Student "labor" and institutional responses to acknowledge and compensate students for their work are areas in need of reflection and change. As institutions continue to shift their practices to better align with and center students' experiences, there needs to be a renewed focus on validating student effort.

Fair and ethical compensation shows students that their experiences matter, their voices are being heard, and action steps are being taken to create equitable futures for higher education. Recognizably, this opportunity area might seem difficult to implement, at first. It requires us to unlearn longstanding practices that have relied on students being sourced without compensation. It requires us to imagine a system of higher education that is based on mutual collaboration and reciprocal relationships between students and administrators.

THOUGHT STARTERS

THINK INWARD

How do you currently demonstrate to students that their experiences matter, their voices are being heard, and action steps are being taken based on their feedback?

THINK OUTWARD

How does your team, department, or campus source and support students for change-making efforts? Is it equitable? Does it advance student skills and competencies?

THINK FORWARD

What possibilities exist if students and administrators collaborated as genuine partners in service of institutional change?

OPPORTUNITY SPACE 02

How might we reconfigure existing power dynamics and resource flows to increase student agency and authority in decision-making processes?

From the experiences students shared, we learned there is a need for transparency around how money and resources are spent and allocated, who gets to make these decisions, and how these decisions are creating opportunities for systematically excluded communities to gain more equitable access to learning opportunities.

Disrupting power hierarchies is critical to understanding how we can bring in perspectives from those who are most impacted by the system of higher education and ensure their experiences are acknowledged and centered. Creating spaces that not only open the black box of institutional decision-making but also offer opportunities for students to inform, critique, and engage within institutional priorities can go a long way in establishing trust.

THOUGHT STARTERS

THINK INWARD

What role do you believe students should play in the development of institutional priorities?

THINK OUTWARD

What formalized policies encourage students' involvement in decision-making and protect their interests in transformational change goals and objectives? How can you ensure spaces are extended to all student populations – including the most marginalized?

THINK FORWARD

What if higher education decision-makers trusted students to lead the redesign of higher education?

OPPORTUNITY SPACE 03

How might we cultivate a culture of care and concern that elevates mental health and wellness to the same status as academic pursuits?

The struggles and strategies to maintain mental health are pervasive. Many students in this study advocated for more mental health support on campus. Further, many felt that during the pandemic and times of racial unrest, their campus showed little interest in the mental health of the students. Some shared personal experiences navigating their mental health on campus, then describing how the institutional climate led to poorer outcomes for their holistic wellbeing. Others discussed being unable to access mental health services available to them through their respective institutions and how in some cases, these resources were inadequate and unable to support them.

Students who are overwhelmed often find it hard to cope or fully engage in their college, work and social lives. Treating wellness as a community-wide responsibility is one step in the right direction. Further action to support minoritized students that are disproportionately impacted is also required.

THOUGHT STARTERS

THINK INWARD

How do you currently make room for wellness? How comfortable or uncomfortable are you in having mental health conversations with students?

THINK OUTWARD

What formal and informal models of care currently exist to support students through their developmental journey? Are they currently connected? Cohesive? How diverse is your clinical staff?

THINK FORWARD

If we look at wellness proactively, how might it be better integrated across curricular and co-curricular experiences?

OPPORTUNITY SPACE 04

How might we create dignifying and humanizing educational experiences that allow students to thrive and flourish?

We learned from students that those who felt more recognized and seen in relationships with selected faculty or staff members, shared similar identities and experiences.

As one student noted in the participatory design studio session, we need *"to make sure all groups of people feel comfortable, safe, and heard in their school communities."* Another student envisioned higher education as an all-encompassing space for students to thrive: *"Higher education is meant to allow ALL students equal ability to grow academically, personally, and emotionally so they feel fulfilled and prepared for their future."* Centering students' needs and creating a safe environment for students to engage in healthful learning experiences is an opportunity space primed for innovative solutions.

THOUGHT STARTERS

THINK INWARD

What does it mean to you to foster humanizing educational experiences? What does it look and feel like to see students thriving? How about not thriving?

THINK OUTWARD

How does your institution currently make diversity, equity, and inclusion a part of campus culture? What opportunities exist for feedback and active engagement?

THINK FORWARD

What if the voices of systematically excluded, silenced, and marginalized students were elevated or prioritized amongst all voices in higher education? What if more identity-based pathways were created for students to navigate institutional support and resources?

CONCLUSION

PLEASE MIND THE TRUST GAP

American higher education is currently situated at a pivotal moment when its next steps toward promoting equity will determine future states for students, communities, and society at large for years to come.

Students are integral members of "the field." Yet too often, their voices are extracted only to confirm higher education professionals' pre-established decisions, objectives, plans, and actions. This approach lacks authentic listening and understanding.

The way out of chronic inequities in higher education is clear. If we view today's students as the experts on their lived experiences, recognize students' intimate understanding of structural flaws that fuel disparities, and welcome the fresh, inventive, fearless mindsets students possess, everyone will benefit.

APPENDIX

Methodology and Approach

We sought to identify insights and opportunities relative to the dimensions of trust (or mistrust) between students and institutions through a mixed-method approach. The process began by recruiting fifty-one students from the following organizations:

1. Leda Scholars
2. Campus Compact Newman Civic Fellows
3. Veterans Education Success
4. UAspire

Demographics

- 86% between the ages of 18 and 24
- 27% Asian or Pacific Islander; 18% Black or African American; 22% Hispanic or Latino; 2% Native American or Alaskan Native; 25% White or Caucasian; 4% Multiracial or Biracial
- 47% fourth year students; 31% third year students
- 86% of students work for pay (about 43% percent work on campus and 29% work on and off campus)

It's also important we highlight that nearly all students in this survey cohort would be considered "high-achieving." For instance, 85% of Leda Scholars have enrolled in a "Most Competitive" school and 36% in an Ivy League college. Newman Civic Fellows are nominated by their president or chancellor based on their potential for public leadership. And UAspire's policy fellowship program helps recruited students build advocacy skills and execute campaigns to influence leaders with changes needed in higher education affordability and equity.

A variety of methods were employed including:

Survey

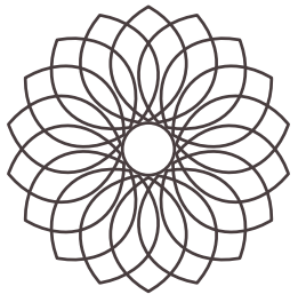
From multiple dimensions (personal, collective, societal) we created a baseline understanding of student views related to value and trust in higher education. Findings were used to inform a qualitative 1:1 interview protocol and activities for student/stakeholder design studio.

Interviews

We relied on individual virtual interviews as a means of eliciting the voice of the student. Using a semi-structured interview protocol, a broad range of topics were addressed with study participants.

Participatory Design Studio

We invited students and participating recruitment partners to a virtual workshop 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 provide clarity to insights, add focus to supporting examples, and strengthen opportunity spaces.



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