



CONNECT  
DEEPLY

PRACTICE  
REFLECTION

KEEP PACE

STAY  
SECURE

BE WELL

BELONG

MAINTAIN  
DETERMINATION

# The Chemistry of Student Success

Nine Elements of a Thriving Student Experience

# Introducing A Student-Crafted Blueprint for Thriving in College

To uncover the facets of student success, we turned to the most knowledgeable experts: the students themselves. Drawing on a mix of qualitative and quantitative research methods\*, we engaged with over 750 students attending both community college and 4-year institutions from across the nation over two years, posing two critical questions: **“What does thriving mean within the college experience, and how do you recognize when you are?”**

Our findings reveal that thriving is profoundly personal, varying widely in definition and realization among students. Students acknowledge their own pivotal role in fostering their own success but also want and need their institutions to demonstrate a vested interest in their outcomes.

For those who struggle to find their footing, the sensation is one of isolation. Burdened by mental and emotional strain, engagement with their education becomes a challenge. Among all the factors influencing thriving, emotional well-being consistently ranks at the top, underpinning every other aspect of their experience.

Armed with an abundant collection of student insight, we've synthesized the research into nine critical elements that encapsulate a thriving student experience. While not meant to be exhaustive - the world that surrounds today's students is simply far too complex to capture, the elements seek to call attention to the overall experience we must intentionally design and support. They chart a course from individual well-being and inclusion within a supportive community to making a meaningful societal impact, offering a holistic framework for evaluating student advancement and reaching student potential.

*\*Research was guided by the work of two visionaries. Stanford professor Dr. Carol Dweck provided the concept of a growth mindset. A social psychologist, Dweck's groundbreaking research led to the insight that success in school, work, sports, the arts and almost every area of human endeavor can be dramatically influenced by our mindset - our belief in whether our ability to learn and develop is fixed or constantly evolving through our efforts.*

*The seminal work of Dr. Laurie Schreiner, retired chair of the doctoral programs in Higher Education at Azusa Pacific University broadened our definition of student success. Schreiner's explorations into the difference between students who thrive in college compared to those who succeed or merely survive lays the foundation for the elements that can help students stay deeply engaged in their learning experience.*



# Nine Elements of a Thriving Student Experience

Our framework unfolds in a deliberate sequence, beginning with the foundational aspects of the student experience: Establishing a sense of BELONGing within the community, and ensuring holistic well-being (BE WELL, STAY SECURE). This foundation is crucial, as it sets the tone for the nurturing of personal skills and the formation of meaningful relationships (CONNECT DEEPLY), maintaining balance amidst the demands of college life (KEEP PACE), and fostering a habit of introspective growth (PRACTICE REFLECTION).

As students grow, they learn to extend the reach of their developed skills and nurtured relationships to broader horizons. This is where personal advancement aligns with professional development (EXPAND BOUNDARIES), resilience transforms into unyielding determination (MAINTAIN DETERMINATION), and ultimately, the empowerment gained through education and experience inspires tangible personal and societal impact (INSPIRE CHANGE).

Let's now review each element in detail where we offer descriptive statements, a short statement to students demonstrating application and relevance, and a set of strong and weak signals that indicate alignment or misalignment with these elements.



# Element 1 | BELONG

**B**<sub>l</sub>

**B**<sub>w</sub>

**S**<sub>c</sub>

**C**<sub>d</sub>

**K**<sub>p</sub>

**P**<sub>r</sub>

**E**<sub>b</sub>

**M**<sub>d</sub>

**I**<sub>s</sub>

**Establishing a foundational sense of community and inclusion is essential for a student's sense of security and engagement.**

Dear Student,

To confidently be yourself, to learn and grow at your best possible rate requires a culture and environment that reflects you in countless ways. From the language, images, symbols, and histories we present; to the pedagogy, curriculum, clubs and events we offer, to the students and faculty and staff we enroll or hire; ALL students should feel like they belong to a thriving community of people who know what it means to feel recognized, represented, respected and accepted.



## **Strong Signal**

*"I am apart of this amazing community for FGLI (first-generation, low income) and the whole program is based on this idea of community and peer support."*



## **Weak Signal**

*"I often sit in the back because it feels like I'm looking at a world where I don't fit. I'm told I belong but I'm still searching for a sign that says, 'You're meant to be here too.'"*



## Element 2 | BE WELL

B<sub>l</sub>

**B<sub>w</sub>**

S<sub>c</sub>

C<sub>d</sub>

K<sub>p</sub>

P<sub>r</sub>

E<sub>b</sub>

M<sub>d</sub>

I<sub>s</sub>

**Emphasizing the importance of holistic well-being ensures students are ready to engage fully in their personal, academic and professional lives.**

Dear Student,

Your well-being is as critical as your academic achievements. Mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional health are fundamental to reaching your personal and professional goals. Put simply - self-care should be integral to your college experience!



### **Strong Signal**

*“There’s a sometimes-hostile campus mentality and environment that stifles the growth of ambitious students. Many of my peers have transferred to other universities and colleges because of this.”*



### **Weak Signal**

*“I feel that mental health services should be better equipped to interact with students with intersecting identities.”*



## Element 3 | STAY SECURE

B<sub>l</sub>

B<sub>w</sub>

**S<sub>c</sub>**

C<sub>d</sub>

K<sub>p</sub>

P<sub>r</sub>

E<sub>b</sub>

M<sub>d</sub>

I<sub>s</sub>

**Prioritizing financial literacy and stability empowers students to navigate their educational journey without the burden of undue financial stress.**

Dear Student,

Navigating your education means more than just hitting the books – it's also about getting smart with your finances. We're here to give you the tools and knowledge to manage money (or lack of money) wisely. This way, you can focus on your studies without the extra weight of financial worry holding you back. Let's make sure money matters don't distract from your success.



### Strong Signal

*“Yesterday I didn’t know how I would pay for my books but then I learned about this Federal work study and I landed a job in the admissions office. I feel so much better now because the job works with my class schedule too.”*



### Weak Signal

*“I’m SO stressed about money and my student loans. I’m not even sure I should be here and I’m definitely not sure how I’ll handle the debt after I graduate.”*



# Element 4 | CONNECT DEEPLY

B<sub>l</sub>

B<sub>w</sub>

S<sub>c</sub>

**C<sub>d</sub>**

K<sub>p</sub>

P<sub>r</sub>

E<sub>b</sub>

M<sub>d</sub>

I<sub>s</sub>

**Building meaningful relationships greatly enhances the support networks surrounding students.**

Dear Student,

Recognizing you as a complete individual—your background, strengths, dreams, and life circumstances—is where relationships begin. Every interaction with people who support your journey should be a way for them to understand you better and to provide the support you need, precisely when you need it. Are they listening thoughtfully and intentionally? Are they responding with sincerity? If yes, you've got the means to build a deep-rooted support system to guide you through challenges and celebrate successes.



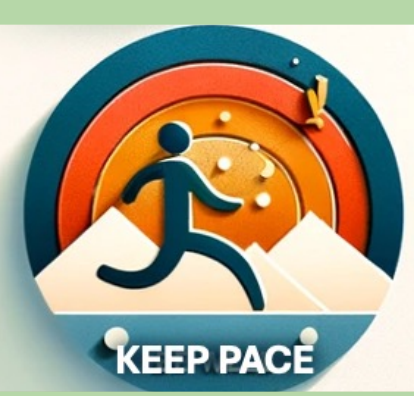
## Strong Signal

*"Both my advisors have listened and took the time to get to know me and what I want in my future. I can't believe how much this helped my well-being. I feel like I can really accomplish my goals."*



## Weak Signal

*"It would be great if they actually backed up our communities by hearing us out, especially when so many of us have spoken up together. We need real support, not just a tokenized pat on the back."*



# Element 5 | KEEP PACE

B<sub>l</sub>  
B<sub>w</sub>  
S<sub>c</sub>  
C<sub>d</sub>  
**K<sub>p</sub>**  
P<sub>r</sub>  
E<sub>b</sub>  
M<sub>d</sub>  
I<sub>s</sub>

**Managing time and energy helps to maintain balance between various commitments.**

Dear Student,

The quest for a knowledge and skills that draws you to college is the same force that can make navigating it daunting. As you step into this world of vast opportunities, remember that your time and energy are your greatest assets. How are you gauging your progress? Are you making informed choices about your path? Where do you go for guidance and support? Embrace your pace and remember – when time and energy work for you, creativity and productivity soars.



## Strong Signal

*"Some of my teachers have gone the extra mile to see me succeed. Four of them even offered extra time after class to help me find an internship, which is amazing because I'm swamped and can hardly manage to do it on my own."*



## Weak Signal

*"I'm running from one thing to the next, and I'm just exhausted all the time. I can't find a moment to breathe, let alone keep up with all my classes and then work. It's like I'm always playing catch-up."*





# Element 6 | PRACTICE REFLECTION

B<sub>l</sub>

B<sub>w</sub>

S<sub>c</sub>

C<sub>d</sub>

K<sub>p</sub>

**Pr**

E<sub>b</sub>

M<sub>d</sub>

I<sub>s</sub>

**Exploring self-reflection promotes both individual development and educational progress**

Dear Student,

Thinking about life's experiences is a natural human instinct, yet mastering reflection is an art. Developing a routine of introspection isn't just beneficial; it's transformative, fostering profound self-awareness. How are you cultivating this skill? Do you know the ways to evaluate your current knowledge, identify areas for growth, and seamlessly connect your deepest aspirations to achievable goals? If not, we have the tools and opportunities to help you master this skill.



## Strong Signal

*"Taking time to reflect has really changed the game for me. It's like I've tuned into my own frequency. I understand where I stand, what I need to learn, and how I can connect the dots to my future goals. It's like having a map of my mind."*



## Weak Signal

*"I know I should think about where I'm headed, but it's impossible. Most of the time I feel like I'm just going through the motions without stopping to really think about what I'm learning or where I want to go."*



# Element 7 | EXPAND BOUNDARIES

B<sub>l</sub>

B<sub>w</sub>

S<sub>c</sub>

C<sub>d</sub>

K<sub>p</sub>

P<sub>r</sub>

**E<sub>b</sub>**

M<sub>d</sub>

I<sub>s</sub>

**Enriching networks and engaging in professional development helps align academic success with career goals.**

Dear Student,

As part of our college community, you'll build a network that expands your horizons and opens up new possibilities for support and learning. Through interactions with faculty, staff, alumni, and professionals, your journey is enriched—turning every club, event, or internship into a chance to enhance your skills and make the most of these connections, planned or unexpected.



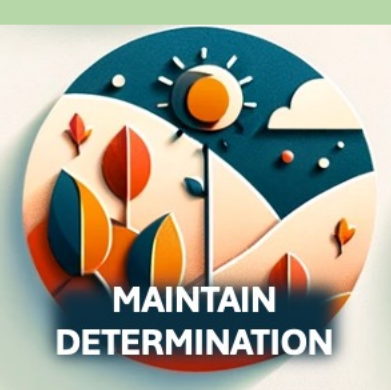
## Strong Signal

*"I've been making the most of every chance to network. I've got a great mentor who seems to know how to always point me in the right direction. I'm now a senior and it feels like every person I meet is another step toward my dream job."*



## Weak Signal

*"I know, I know, networking is key. At least that's what they tell me but I'm struggling to make the right connections. I do try to attend events and meet people, but it's hard to see how everything fits."*



# Element 8 | MAINTAIN DETERMINATION

B<sub>l</sub>

B<sub>w</sub>

S<sub>c</sub>

C<sub>d</sub>

K<sub>p</sub>

P<sub>r</sub>

E<sub>b</sub>

**M<sub>d</sub>**

I<sub>s</sub>

**Building unwavering determination provides the ability to bounce back in your academic endeavors and personal goals.**

Dear Student,

Your journey is a marathon, not a sprint. To reach the finish line, your determination and resilience are key. In your studies and life's challenges, stay the course.

Embrace each setback as a step forward and remember that persistence is your greatest ally. Keep pushing, keep learning, and know that every effort you make builds the strength to achieve your dreams.



## Strong Signal

*"I look for great tutor programs, advisors, and most importantly professors who prioritize academic excellence. I expect the professors to be the people with diverse knowledge and continually be developing."*



## Weak Signal

*"I'm feeling pretty defeated after what happened with my professor. It's gotten to where I'm questioning if I should even be here. Maybe this place isn't for me after all."*



# Element 9 | INSPIRE CHANGE

B<sub>l</sub>  
B<sub>w</sub>  
S<sub>c</sub>  
C<sub>d</sub>  
K<sub>p</sub>  
P<sub>r</sub>  
E<sub>b</sub>  
M<sub>d</sub>  
I<sub>s</sub>

**Channeling accumulated knowledge and life experiences creates meaningful impact.**

Dear Student,

In a world calling out for change, you are not just a student but a future changemaker. Your college journey should be designed to awaken this potential. It's demanding, yes, but it connects you to a purpose much larger than yourself. With every challenge you overcome, you're stepping closer to making your distinct mark. Know that our commitment is to nurture your growth, to invest in your vision, because we see the power you hold to reshape the world.



## Strong Signal

*"I can see the change I want to make right in front of me. I see the world in a different way now and I'm ready to be the one to make it better. What will soon be my alma mater has really equipped me to take on the world's challenges."*





## Weak Signal


*"I feel like I'm just going through the motions, struggling to see how my efforts matter. I feel like the world is in a bad place and I'm overwhelmed, trying to keep up. What difference could I possibly make?"*


# Nine Ways for Students to Apply *The Chemistry of Student Success*


More than an abstract ideal, our framework is a practical tool aiding students in navigating their journey. Each element, while powerful on its own, is part of an interconnected whole, mirroring the multifaceted nature of student growth. Combine and recombine the elements to assess and strategize for a well-rounded educational experience.


**belong**  Conduct a self-assessment on feelings of inclusion within your campus groups. Do you feel heard and valued in these spaces?

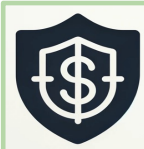
**connect**  **deeply** Reflect on your sense of balance: How effectively are you managing your time and energy across different areas of your life to maintain balance while fulfilling commitments?


**expand**  **boundaries** Inventory the campus resources you've utilized. Are there untapped opportunities that could further enhance your academic success?


**be**  **well** Reflecting on your personal wellness, how do you currently prioritize and maintain your physical and mental health amidst your academic responsibilities?

**keep**  **pace** Reflecting on your sense of balance, how do you organize and allocate your time and energy across your various commitments?

**maintain**  **determination** Reflect on recent challenges. Did you persevere or consider giving up? Assess your response to adversity to gauge your resilience.

**stay**  **secure** Review your current financial situation regularly. Are you applying your budgeting skills and resources effectively?

**practice**  **reflection** Maintain a reflection journal. What patterns do you see in your entries that reveal growth in self-awareness and understanding of your journey?

**inspire**  **change** Take stock of your achievements. Have you acknowledged and learned from these successes? Assess if this recognition motivates you to set and pursue new goals.

# The Opportunity

**If you are a college or university,** consider partnering with us to tap into a wealth of insights from diverse student populations or collaborate to develop your own research action plan. Our tailored approaches and expert analyses offer a deeper understanding of the student experience, enabling you to craft strategies that resonate with and effectively support your learners.

With our suite of assessments and design tools, we provide a foundation for educational leaders, faculty, and staff to foster environments where student success is not left to chance. Call us to harness the full potential of your institution's capabilities, transforming data-driven insights into actionable, effective student support strategies.

## Contact Information

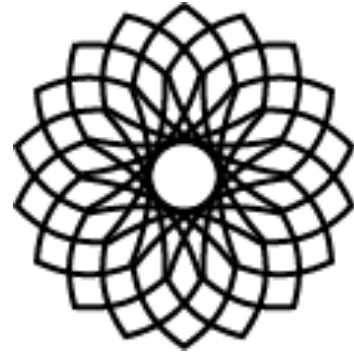
Christine Flanagan, President, Kinetic Seeds  
[cflanagan@kineticseeds.com](mailto:cflanagan@kineticseeds.com)

## About Kinetic Seeds

We are a design consultancy tackling complex educational challenges. Our approach uncovers powerful insights and opportunities generated by liberatory design-thinking methodologies, translating 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 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.

[www.kineticseeds.com](http://www.kineticseeds.com)



**kinetic seeds**