

Strategic Presidential Leadership, Thriving Communities, and Vital Conditions

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What does “thriving community” mean? How does an institution become a “thriving community?”

During these challenging times, presidents are focused on successfully leading their campuses. Whether these challenges include social protests, DEI discussions, public perception of the value of higher education, or a myriad of other issues, presidents and institutional leaders can benefit from understanding and committing to actions that focus on achieving a “thriving institutional community.” A “thriving institutional community” can help address, move through, and overcome these challenges, which leads to enhanced institutional morale, greater faculty/staff institutional community, increased student retention, and increased philanthropy. I imagine that every institutional president wants their campus to be a “thriving community.” The questions are: What does “thriving community” mean? And, how does an institution become a “thriving community?”

The original Thriving Communities Initiative is a national framework called The Federal Plan for Equitable Long-Term Recovery and Resilience (Federal Plan for ELTR) that utilizes the Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being. The Vital Conditions create and sustain a healthy community that has, at its core, a sense of belonging for every community member.

“Healthy, fulfilling relationships and strong social supports provide a foundation for individuals and families to thrive. These relationships and supports build social ties, trust, and cooperation in communities and foster connections that bring people together and shape a common vision”

Nationally, these vital conditions within the thriving community framework include access to: education, healthcare, food, housing, transportation, and, work. This framework provides a roadmap for leaders to envision, create, and lead unified communities. Rather than thinking about each vital condition as a separate variable, envision an ecosystem where all these vital conditions intersect and, together, result in every community member thriving and feeling this is exactly where they belong.

SOURCE: (<https://health.gov/our-work/national-health-initiatives/equitable-long-term-recovery-and-resilience/framework/belonging-and-civic-muscle>).



This model is not only applicable to regional communities, it is easily generalizable and a perfect fit for higher education institutions and the vital conditions needed for faculty, staff, and students to feel they belong and thrive within and among their respective campus communities. Presidents and institutional leaders who are besieged with internal and external pressures and politics have the opportunity to bring together and implement the primary vital conditions for thriving institutional communities. These vital conditions include, but are not limited to, access to: food services, quality educational opportunities (within and outside the classroom), support service offices, housing (on campus or off campus), and meaningful employment while a student and post-graduation.

In a recent thought piece for the American Council on Education , I discussed the criteria needed for presidential leadership to effectively manage crises.

These four criteria included:

- 1 students, faculty, and staff on campuses feel safe from physical violence.
- 2 students, faculty, and staff have emotional and mental health support.
- 3 campuses remain an educational haven for students to learn and demonstrate critical thinking, healthy conversations, perspective taking, and intercultural communication to successfully cross lines of difference.
- 4 consistent presidential communication with the campus and its constituents that these three criteria are of the highest priority for the institution.





Keeping those four criteria in mind and extending from the national “thriving community initiative” model, I suggest that successful presidents and institutional leaders embrace and implement the following vital conditions for every student, faculty, and staff:

- ✓ Access to mental and physical health support
- ✓ Access to housing on and/or off-campus
- ✓ Access to learning in and outside of the classroom;
- ✓ Access to services needed to succeed academically
- ✓ Access to financial support services
- ✓ Access to food on campus or through food pantries
- ✓ Access to work during their educational experiences and post-graduation
- ✓ Access and input to the institutional mission and vision

Like any physical region, the higher education community (virtual or face to face) is an ecosystem where each of these vital conditions must co-exist in concert with the others in order to truly become a thriving community. The successful presidents focused on these vital conditions in their communities lead with the vision of how, when, where, and why these

vital conditions can co-exist, be supported, and be accessible to all faculty, staff and students.

When I was the President at the University of La Verne in Southern California (2011-2023), the campus focused on the thriving community model. An example was to build a magnificent structure in the middle of the campus named the Ludwick Center for Spirituality, Cultural Understanding and Community Engagement. This Center focused on housing offices, creating collaboration spaces, and hosting events and series that brought together faculty staff and students to explore their differences, have civil conversations, and to become critical thinkers and problem solvers. At the same time, the campus built the Lewis Center for Well-Being and Research. This Center houses a food pantry, work out areas, mindfulness areas, and workshops for healthy living. This is an example of how the campus strategically focused on creating physical spaces, classes, and co-curricular activities that fostered inclusion and belonging.

While the country wrestles with a myriad of other important, timely, and hotly debated higher education topics, success will be measured by those visionary, compassionate, collaborative, humble, authentic, and resilient institutional presidents and leaders who create thriving institutional communities ensuring that the vital conditions co-exist and are accessible for all campus constituents.



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