

WHEN CARE BECOMES A SUBSTITUTE FOR DESIGN

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“We are a student-centered institution.”

I have heard some version of this statement uttered by countless community college presidents, chancellors, and senior leaders over the course of my career. It is usually offered with confidence and good intent, and rarely with much scrutiny. Like the phrase “we’re all about student success,” it has become an institutional reflex that is reassuring, morally affirming, and largely unquestioned.

The language appears routinely in mission statements, strategic plans, accreditation narratives, and public messaging. In practice, it often functions less as a description of how the institution actually operates and more as a declaration of who the institution believes itself to be.

Community colleges are not unique in this regard. Higher education is filled with what I like to call suitcase labels, terms such as excellence, innovation, access, equity, and student success. These words are packed with aspiration and goodwill. They travel easily from one document to another, yet they are rarely unpacked into specific design choices. Over time, their repeated use confers moral authority while their operational meaning becomes increasingly diffuse.

Institutional claims matter only to the extent that design shapes the student experience.

The appeal of student-centeredness is easy to understand. Community colleges serve students navigating financial pressure, work and family obligations, and limited margin for error. To say that students are at the center of institutional work feels ethically appropriate and publicly reassuring. It signals care, seriousness, and alignment with mission.

Still, I find myself returning to a simple question. How would a student actually know this to be true? If a student walked onto two community college campuses, one that described itself as student-centered and one that did not, what would feel different? Would the distinction be visible in clearer program pathways, simpler registration, coordinated support, or earlier intervention when momentum begins to slip? Or would the difference exist primarily in institutional language rather than lived experience?

When nearly every institution makes the same claim, its value no longer lies in what it expresses, but in what it enables. At that point, leadership responsibility shifts. The question is no longer whether the idea is well-intentioned, but whether it meaningfully guides institutional action.

When results do not follow the rhetoric

When I look across the sector through the lens of student outcomes such as persistence, completion, transfer with momentum, and post-college opportunity, the evidence presents an uncomfortable challenge.

Colleges that describe themselves most emphatically as student-centered do not, on average, demonstrate stronger outcomes than those that do not. Performance varies widely across the sector, but that variation does not align in any consistent way with how institutions articulate their identity or values. In many cases, the language of student-centeredness is most prominent at institutions struggling most with student outcomes.

**Care is not a causal mechanism.
Outcomes follow structure, not
intention.**

This pattern invites a cautious but important question about whether there may be an inverse relationship between rhetoric and results. Even without drawing that conclusion, the absence of any positive correlation alone

should give senior leaders pause.

This does not suggest indifference or lack of moral commitment. In my experience, it suggests something more troubling. Caring, by itself, does not operate as a causal mechanism. The language of student-centeredness explains very little about why some colleges improve outcomes while others do not.

For presidents, trustees, and institutional effectiveness leaders, this raises a serious question. If an organizing idea neither differentiates performance nor predicts improvement, what role is it actually playing in institutional life?

Why the language persists

Part of the power of the phrase ‘student-centered’ lies in the origins of its underlying logic. The language reflects assumptions common to care-based fields such as healthcare, social services, and hospitality, where quality is often assessed through responsiveness, attentiveness, and the reduction of friction or distress. In those contexts, success is closely tied to how effectively an organization meets individuals where they are and responds to immediate needs.

Education’s central task is not to adapt endlessly to the learner, but to develop the learner’s capacity to meet demanding expectations. While care and support are essential conditions for learning, they are not its defining aim. Education asks students to engage with ideas, standards, and expectations that exist beyond their immediate preferences and comfort. Progress requires challenge, effort, and sustained practice, not simply responsiveness.

When the language and assumptions of care-based professions are imported wholesale into educational settings, the institution can begin to treat learning as a service experience rather than as a formative process.

**When the language of care replaces
the discipline of learning, institutional
purpose blurs.**

The result is not a loss of compassion, but a blurring of purpose. Support becomes central rather than enabling, and the work of formation becomes harder to articulate and defend.

When language substitutes for design

Student-centeredness did not begin as an empty idea. It emerged as a critique of institution-centered systems that prioritized internal convenience over student experience. In its early form, it implied redesign.

Over time, however, I have watched the idea drift. What began as an operational challenge gradually became a moral posture. Student-centeredness increasingly described institutional character rather than institutional behavior.

As a result, colleges can sincerely claim to be student-centered while retaining the same academic calendars, course sequences, advising structures, and fragmented handoffs that have shaped student experience for decades. **The language affirms values without requiring tradeoffs. It reassures without compelling redesign.**

Where meaningful improvements in outcomes do occur, they are rarely attributable to shifts in rhetoric. They are associated with difficult operational decisions such as clearer program pathways, structured onboarding, predictable scheduling, early momentum monitoring, and shared accountability across instruction and student support.

Outcomes follow design far more reliably than they follow intention. What distinguishes institutions making progress is not greater compassion, but greater willingness to translate care into structure.

Is student-centeredness still the right call?

The purpose of this critique is not to argue that community colleges should care less about students. That would be both false and irresponsible. The sector's moral commitment is not in doubt.

The question is whether student-centeredness, as it is commonly understood and practiced, remains a useful organizing principle for institutional decision-making. As a slogan, it reassures. As a strategy, it underperforms.

Perhaps the problem is not the impulse behind the phrase, but the way it has been operationalized, or more accurately, the way it has not. To be truly student-centered would require redesigning processes, aligning structures, clarifying pathways, and accepting constraints that make student progress more likely. That work is difficult, political, and slow. In my experience, few institutions pursue it deeply, even as many claim the label enthusiastically.

There may still be a place for student-centeredness, but only if it is stripped of sentimental comfort and reinterpreted as a demanding design discipline rather than a moral identity. Until then, it risks functioning as a verbal flagpost that is highly visible, emotionally satisfying, and largely disconnected from the outcomes that matter most.

Community colleges have never lacked care. What this moment demands is the courage to ensure that care is expressed not primarily through language, but through the hard work of organizing institutions to help students actually move forward.

Conclusion

This essay is intended to surface assumptions that have become so familiar in community college discourse that they often go unexamined. These ideas are rarely ill-intentioned. Many emerged from genuine concern for students and from real shortcomings in earlier institutional models. Over time, however, even well-meaning frameworks can harden into habits that limit institutional imagination and blunt improvement.

The challenge facing community colleges is not a lack of commitment or compassion. It is the difficulty of translating values into operating designs that reliably produce student progress. Doing so requires sustained attention to structure, coherence, and execution, as well as the willingness to question language that comforts but no longer clarifies.

The issues raised here reflect observations drawn from long engagement with institutional planning, performance analysis, and system-level reform work. They are offered in the spirit of strengthening the sector's capacity to move beyond affirmation toward action, and beyond intention toward measurable impact. The future of community colleges will depend less on what institutions say about themselves and more on how deliberately they organize their work to help students move forward.

Further reading: [When Institutional Language Gets Ahead of Institutional Reality](#)

Sources

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