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How and Why Mattering is the Secret to Student Success: An Analysis of the Views and Practices of Award-Winning Professors

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Abstract: The students of today are especially in need of resources that will enable them to pursue their goals and overcome recent challenges, including possible setbacks arising from the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the current commentary, review, and analysis, we examine the nature of "student success" and how *mattering* is a vital relational resource that can facilitate it. We describe the mattering construct and measures for assessing it among college and university students, and then provide a summary of previous research and theory suggesting mattering plays a vital role in their success and performance. We also examine the ways in which 12 award-winning professors perceive mattering and student success and how the promotion of mattering is reflected in their values and teaching practices. Their views paint a portrait of the successful student with a sense of mattering who feels valued, and how this mattering is reflected in self-efficacy, outcome expectancies, and a broad success orientation. These professors also provide a list of recommendations for mattering-promotion practices that can put less successful students back on the pathway to success. We also discuss how the proactive development of students who feel like they matter is central to achieving key institutional goals related to student recruitment and retention and alumni engagement.

Keywords: Mattering, Success, Students, Performance, Motivation, Learning, Colleges, Universities, Student Retention.

Introduction

A key overarching issue that seems especially pertinent to consider in the inaugural issue of the *Interdisciplinary Journal of Student Success* is what exactly constitutes "success." There is a subjective aspect to the concept; what is deemed to be a success by one student may not be how another views it. This is apparent to anyone who conducts research on highly perfectionistic students. Extreme perfectionists who do exceptionally well but fall short of perfection may deem the result to be a failure marked by dissatisfaction—especially if another student outperforms them. Because some perfectionists are hypersensitive to social comparison feedback and outcomes, they will feel like failures if they do not receive the top score on a test (for a discussion, see Flett & Hewitt, 2022).

A related consideration is whether a student defines success solely in academic achievement terms or has a broader view that reflects various life domains and ways of defining the self. Some students are highly successful in an academic sense, but far from it in the interpersonal sphere. The impact of interpersonal setbacks and other life events is clearly illustrated in the work by George Vaillant, who tracked the life courses of gifted children in Terman's classic study (see Vaillant, 1997). Vaillant reminded us that while being intellectually gifted is highly advantageous, doing well in school does not ensure success in life.

Success can also be defined in terms of emotional health and well-being. The first author of this article served for three years as the Undergraduate Program Director in the Department of Psychology at York University. This role involved weekly individual appointments with students who struggled academically due to stressors in their lives that caused anxiety and depression and, ultimately, undermined their capacity to concentrate, learn, and achieve. Mental health challenges that undermine student success merit more scrutiny. Any attempt to understand and predict student success will ideally be informed by a broad understanding of the challenges and stressors that impact students. Vredenburg et al. (1993) discussed these stressors and challenges in their defense of using college and university students as participants in depression research. They emphasized that students typically find themselves in highly competitive environments, perhaps far from home, and at a time in their lives when issues of self and personal identity are paramount. If viewed from this context, we still have much to learn from students faced with complex challenges but able to rise above them.

The goal of the current article is to paint a portrait of what constitutes student success or failure through the eyes of award-winning professors. Some of the observations provided later segment in this article came about as a result of a broader qualitative interview study on award-winning professors' views on mattering and its role in education (see Pychyl et al., 2022). What is mattering, why are we focusing on it, and how does it relate

to student success? These topics are considered in the next section. We also provide a summary of previous research pointing to the importance of mattering for student success. We then conclude by describing further results from the professor interviews about mattering and its role in student success.

The initial research reported by Pychyl et al. (2022) established that award-winning professors have a clear sense that students need to feel like they matter to succeed, and this is reflected in their reported teaching approach. Pychyl et al. (2022) concluded that the professors seem to fully embrace mattering in their practices, even if they may be unfamiliar with the mattering construct and are not entirely mindful of it. Most professors interviewed were to some degree cognizant of students' need to matter, and found ways to convey it through indications that students are cared about—both as students and as people. Professors also described numerous micro-practices that contravene this goal and should be avoided so that students do not become disillusioned and disengaged (see Pychyl et al., 2022).

Our overarching presumption in the current article is that award-winning professors have invested themselves in providing students with experiences that will help put them on a pathway to success, and avoid the struggles that result when they do not feel cared for and cared about. This presumption fits with other evidence of the value that these exemplary professors place on relational factors and the student growth that takes place when they know they are cared for and cared about (see Rossetti & Fox, 2009). Not surprisingly, they seem acutely aware of what student success looks like and the relational factors and processes that contribute to it. Of course, it is also not surprising that they are very aware of the signs and indications expressed by those students who are not doing well.

We now consider mattering and its components in more detail. We also make a key distinction between a global view of mattering versus a domain-specific view focused on students' feelings of mattering at college or university. We then summarize past research and theory that attest to the importance of mattering in student success. Finally, we revisit the mattering-related observations and insights shared by the 12 professors in our sample.

The Mattering Construct

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) introduced the mattering construct over four decades ago, but it is only in recent years that it has been gaining in prominence. Indeed, the first-ever special issue on mattering was just published (see Flett, 2022).

Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) identified three components of relational mattering: (1) perceiving that people regard us as important; (2) realizing that other people are actively paying attention to us; and (3) sensing that other people depend on us. They proposed that the most important component is being a focus of others' attention. A fourth component is ego extension—that is, the feeling of mattering because we

seem to arouse positive feelings in others who care about us (see Rosenberg, 1985; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Schlossberg (1989) subsequently proposed that mattering also includes the sense of being appreciated by someone or a group of people. This aspect emerged from interviews with caregivers who noted that they felt like they mattered when their dedication to others was appreciated and recognized.

In recent years, there have been some significant additions to the description of the mattering construct. Prilleltensky (2020) proposed that mattering stems from both having value from others and giving value to others. By extension, students need to feel important to others but those who fulfill a role and become depended on (e.g., a volunteer, a mentor, a student ambassador) can come to feel valued through giving to their fellow students, or more broadly, to their college or university.

Another recent extension emphasizes that mattering is double-edged in that while feeling valued has enormous benefits, there are enormous costs and consequences incurred when people are made to feel like they don't matter to others and to society as a whole Flett et al. (2022) introduced the concept of anti-mattering and a measure to assess it called the Anti-Mattering Scale. This work is based on the notion that the feeling of *not* mattering is more than just lacking a feeling of mattering. Initial research with college and university students has shown that the measure of anti-mattering is not redundant with existing mattering measures, and anti-mattering is exceptionally potent. It is associated with impaired emotional regulation and reduced life satisfaction, as well as higher levels of perceived stress, loneliness, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (see Besser et al., 2022; Etherson et al., 2022; Flett et al., 2022; Giangrosso et al., 2022; Macdonald et al., 2020; McComb et al., 2020). It is also linked with a reported history of mental illness among university students (Rose et al., 2019) and perceived stigma from others for seeking help for mental illness (Shannon et al., 2020).

Anti-mattering experiences can leave people feeling invisible, unheard, insignificant, and irrelevant. This concept is relevant to our current focus on student success because anti-mattering and related experiences are antithetical to success, especially if students internalize this feeling. It can be a highly destructive orientation that can drain students and undermine their efforts.

Domain-Specific Mattering at Post-Secondary Schools

Mattering is typically assessed in an overall sense with measures such as the General Mattering Scale (Marcus & Rosenberg, 1987), the Mattering Index (Elliott et al., 2004), and the Anti-Mattering Scale (Flett et al., 2022), but it can also be measured more specifically within various life domains (e.g., mattering to the family, mattering at work, mattering in the community). Mattering at school is highly salient for students.

Two measures have been developed to assess mattering at college or university. Tovar et al. (2009) created the 34-item College Mattering

Inventory based on a conceptualization of mattering centred on receiving attention and support from various people at college (i.e., faculty, counselors, advisors, students). Although there are some significant issues in terms of the wording of scale item content (for a discussion, see Flett, 2018), it is clear from using this measure that meaningful individual differences exist among students in terms of mattering at college.

France and Finney (2010) developed an improved measure called the University Mattering Scale (UMS). France and Finney (2010) made the sound decision to modify the wording of the items that comprise the multidimensional Mattering Index developed by Elliott et al. (2004). The UMS has scales that parallel the scales in the Mattering Index as well as a separate scale assessing ego-extension. A sample ego extension scale item is, "There are people in the school community who would also experience my disappointment if I didn't reach my full potential." UMS scale items in have face validity and are derived from a clear conceptualization of mattering rooted in the original views of Rosenberg and McCullough (1981).

France and Finney (2010) had a sample of 295 students complete the UMS. Participants also completed the Elliott et al. (2004) general Mattering Index as well as measures of university belonging, academic self-efficacy, help-seeking attitudes, student worry, and attitudes toward learning. Anticipated associations were confirmed. For instance, the UMS importance scale was associated with general importance (r = .55) and the UMS awareness scale was associated with general awareness (r = .60). They noted that these associations indicated that their domain-specific measure did not overlap too much with general mattering. Other results indicated that students with higher levels of university mattering reported higher levels of university belonging and perceived professor caring. Links were also found between university mattering and academic self-efficacy, social anxiety, and a positive help-seeking orientation.

Recently, Moschella and Banyard (2021) developed a 10-item short form of the UMS (the UM-S). It has three brief subscales assessing awareness (e.g., "Most people of my university community seem to notice when I come and go"), importance (e.g., "people of my university community don't care about my personal welfare"; reverse-coded), and reliance (e.g., "the people of my university community tend to rely on me for support"). Analyses of data from college students confirmed that scores on the UM-S subscales were significantly associated with higher levels of well-being and higher rates of persistence at college.

The usefulness of domain-specific measures was illustrated by Ning et al. (2021). They used face-valid three-item measures of mattering at college and belonging at college and found that students in Fall 2020 reported substantially lower levels of both mattering and belonging than did the students in Fall 2019. This was seen as, reflecting the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on student orientation activities and experiences in 2020, relative to student activities and experiences in 2019.

They also reported that higher levels of mattering at college were linked with three factors—the opportunity to build connections with five or more students, a more positive move-in experience when arriving on campus, and a more positive welcome experience. These results illustrate the power of first impressions for fostering feelings of mattering as students make the initial transition to campus life.

Mattering and Student Success

Given the associated positive effects of mattering at university, students who feel like they matter at college or university should have comparatively greater academic success. Mattering is a vital resource because it strengthens a positive sense of self and agency. Moreover, it is linked strongly with feelings of hope (Somers et al., 2022) and enhanced adaptability, resilience, grit, and coping in response to academic setbacks (see Flett, 2018). Resilience should be evident in terms of emotional resilience, but also interpersonal resilience and academic resilience. A link between mattering and academic buoyancy has indeed been established (see Flett, Su, Ma, & Guo, 2014). The student with a sense of mattering as part of strong and positive self-definition will be resilient, adaptable, and relatively immune to feeling burned out, defeated, and demoralized when things don't go according to plan. The importance of a positive self is shown by research on test anxiety in students that links worry and anxiety with frequent and intense negative self-thoughts, while positive thoughts about the self facilitate a task and learning orientation (see Blankstein et al., 1990; Blankstein et al., 1989; Flett & Blankstein, 1994).

Our emphasis on mattering is in keeping with broad evidence suggesting that success in college and university is associated with teaching practices, behaviours and values that satisfy students' need for relatedness and connectedness (see Filak & Sheldon, 2003; Hensley et al., 2021). However, it is important to note that although mattering is substantially correlated with this core need and other core needs (e.g., autonomy, competence), the need to matter is distinct in that it more specifically taps the need to feel valued and significant to other people (for related discussions, see Flett, 2018 and Flett et al., 2022).

Ideally, research and theory that links mattering with success needs to view this association from a perspective that includes a strong emphasis on situational factors and current contexts. In this regard, various authors have suggested that feelings of mattering are especially relevant and beneficial during stressful and challenging times such as key life transitions (see Flett, 2018; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

Not surprisingly, mattering has identified as a vital resource during the pandemic due to the myriad challenges involved with lockdowns and social distancing regulations (see Flett & Zangeneh, 2020). When it comes to pandemic-related challenges in the academic domain, a broad one was the sudden shift to online learning. Besser, Flett, and Zeigler-Hill (2022) evaluated a large sample of students from Israel about this experience, and

found those who reported higher levels of mattering also reported considerably better adaptations to the sudden transition to online learning. Students with higher mattering also tended to have lower stress and loneliness. They also reported greater depth of learning, with better motivation, attention, and focus. They also experienced more positive affect and less negative affect. At a more general level, this study also demonstrated the role of individual differences in cognitive, emotional, and behavioural adaptability. Besser et al. (2022) confirmed that mattering was associated with better pandemic-related adaptability.

Mattering is viewed as a key resource when students are making the transition from elementary school to high school, and from high school to post-secondary education. By extension, mattering should also be a key resource for those students who make the transition to graduate school. Mattering is linked not only with resilience and adaptability, it has been suggested that it has clear mental health benefits and, as such, mattering should be promoted at colleges and universities to protect and enhance student well-being (see Flett et al., 2019).

What is it about mattering that facilitates student success? Student accounts emphasize having professors who care about them and make them feel important, to the extent that students strive to not disappoint their professors (e.g., Carson, 1996; Wilson, 1996). Students who feel valued should be less prone to self-doubt and feeling like an imposter.

An explicit focus on the role of mattering in student success is typically traced to the influential work of Nancy Schlossberg, who contrasted feelings of mattering and feelings of marginalization in her influential article, "Marginality and mattering: Key issues in building community" (Schlossberg, 1989). Schlossberg highlighted the fact that a sense of mattering, as opposed to one of marginality, can be rooted in one's environment and situational context, with particular concern for adult learners who are more attuned to any indication they don't matter because they are different from other students. Her work has emphasized that adult learners depend on a welcoming environment to feel like they matter, to both the instructor and the program (see Schlossberg, 1987; Schlossberg & Warren, 1985).

The sense of being marginalized (i.e., not mattering) is relevant to almost everyone who feels different or atypical relative to the majority of other people they encounter. Schlossberg's emphasis on educational settings provided the theoretical impetus for several empirical studies on how the student experience is positively impacted by feelings of mattering to others and the school. We will now discuss some illustrative examples with either a descriptive or an empirical emphasis.

Palmer and Maramba (2012) interviewed four student affairs practitioners about how historically black colleges and universities could proactively create learning conditions steeped in mattering as a way to improve student success and retention. Qualitative analyses also attest to the benefits of mattering-related experiences. For instance, Vetro (2021)

interviewed 11 first-generation students during the pandemic, and all of them agreed that attention from professors was central to their sense of mattering, with some also underscoring the importance of professors listening to them. Moreover, this attention and interest helped propel them to better performance. An earlier investigation by Huerta and Fishman (2014) also emphasized how Latino male undergraduates benefitted from the feeling of mattering derived through relationships with peers on campus and professional staff members. More recently, qualitative research has examined mattering and belonging among undergraduate Latina women in STEM programs (see Rodriguez & Blaney, 2021).

Another detailed analysis examined how students formally in the military negotiated their military identity with their emerging identity as students (see Darcy et al., 2018). This qualitative interview study data highlighted all components of mattering identified by Rosenberg and McCullough (1981) and Schlossberg (1989). Scholars in this research area seldom cite Darcy et al. (2018), but it is a rich account of how the need for mattering may be predominant among students who are transitioning from a role in which they felt like they belonged and they were valued by other veterans and by military organizations. A key aspect of mattering for these students was interacting with other students who had been in the military.

Initial quantitative research by Rayle and Chung (2007/2008) with a sample of undergraduate students evaluated the premise that while excessive academic stress can undermine student experience and success, mattering can be a buffer against this stress. They confirmed that measures of mattering to the college and to friends were both negatively associated with academic stress. Moreover, these associations were considerably more robust than the negative links that academic stress had with social support from family and friends.

More recently, Bodrog, Gloria, and Brockberg (2020) evaluated perceived mattering as a stress buffer among 157 college students who had served or who were currently serving in the military. Mattering was associated robustly with college adjustment and connectedness to campus. It also had a weaker but still positive association with academic stress. Most notably, mattering fully mediated the link between a negative view of the self in college and levels of college adjustment. These findings accord with general evidence linking deficits in mattering with self-criticism and rumination in university students (see Flett et al., 2021).

Duenas and Gloria (2020) evaluated the role of mattering in the experiences of 236 Latinx undergraduate students in a Mid-Western university in the United States, using the UMS. One notable finding was that university mattering was significantly lower among first-generation students. Correlations indicated that mattering was robustly linked with a sense of belonging and with a sense of congruity, but surprisingly, it was unrelated to motivation indices. However, their results-focused on overall levels of mattering and did not consider UMS subscales, so the impact of mattering may have been underestimated. In general, mattering is regarded

as beneficial for all students, but especially those who may have experienced inequity and marginalization. This can reflect issues of not only race and colour, but also disability. Accordingly, mattering has been seen as central to positive experiences of Muslim students attending university in the United States (Cole, 2021) and students with disabilities (Pousson & Sagan, 2021). Interviews of students with disabilities showed that experiences of ableism acted as anti-mattering micro-aggressions that were inconsistent with the need to matter. Ableism often entails marginalizing daily interactions that inappropriately stigmatize disability as a mark of inferiority.

Students with disabilities will also be highly attuned to evidence that their needs are not an institutional priority. Students who don't feel like they matter in general will be highly cognizant of what their school has done or not done to address their needs. They will acutely feel it when glaring oversights are not responsively addressed.

One recent investigation seems to call the supposed benefits of mattering into question—at least on the surface. Schriver and Kulynych (2021) stated in the abstract of their paper that mattering measures were unrelated to student outcomes in a study of 149 college students. However, a closer look at their results reveals that a measure of mattering to parents was indeed associated with higher GPA. Most notably for our purposes, they also found that greater perceived mattering to their course instructor was robustly linked with student engagement. Therefore, the overall evidence of this study attests to the academic benefits of feelings of mattering, including the key element of mattering to the course instructor. The association between mattering to parents and actual performance was in keeping with data from high school students also linking mattering with higher grades (see Somers et al., 2022).

Another longitudinal study with college students conducted over a three-year period starting in 2015 and 2016 by Swanson et al. (2021) also yielded data supporting the link between mattering and higher grades. They reported significant positive associations between perceived mattering to the campus and academic self-efficacy and GPA. Mattering to campus was assessed with an eight-item scale developed by the authors. It was found that mattering to campus was associated with concurrent measures of GPA, academic self-efficacy, and social self-efficacy at each time point. Further analyses indicated that mattering in Year 1 predicted persistence into Year 2, but not Year 3. However, Year 3 persistence was predicted by academic self-efficacy, so it is conceivable that mattering to campus has an indirect link with long-term persistence through its association with academic self-efficacy.

Other results from this same project were reported in a subsequent article by Swanson and Cole (2022). This follow-up analysis indicated mattering to campus in Year 1 and 2 had strong links with Year 3 levels of mattering, suggesting substantial continuity and stability. Year 1 and 2 experiences of being validated by instructors also predicted higher levels of

Year 3 mattering. Most notably, after statistically controlling for the strong association between Year 1 and 2 GPA and Year 3 GPA, academic validation and mattering to campus still had indirect links with Year 3 GPA. Finally, group comparisons found lower levels of Year 3 mattering among Latinx students, but no differences among Black, Asian, multiracial, or White students.

This same team of researchers also found that a sense of mattering to the campus was linked with participation in a comprehensive college transition program (see Melguizo et al., 2021). This program was geared toward students from low-income families and was associated with large increases in both sense of mattering to the campus and perceived belonging on campus. Supplementary analyses established that the program enhanced feelings of mattering for most, including first generation students and students of colour. Melguizo and associates (2021) observed that students with higher levels of perceived mattering are more likely to seek out available enrichment experiences.

Mattering was also the focus of another comprehensive college transition program designed to meet the needs of first-year students from low-income, first-generation, and racial/ethnic minority backgrounds (see Cole et al., 2020). Longitudinal analyses showed significant benefits of feelings of mattering and belonging tied to the transition program. Most notably, the analyses linked a sense of mattering among students with staff care/support and perceptions of the practice of "grade check meetings." Grade check meetings reflect a proactive process that entails professors checking in with students to see how they are doing academically (i.e., being successful or not), and how they feel about how their level of accomplishment. Mattering was also associated with students having a tendency to go "above and beyond" and adding value by providing feedback to other students and engaging in discussions of complex topics with them.

These various sources of information converge to support our contention that mattering is central to student success. Existing evidence accords with individual accounts of how a caring educator turned things around for previously struggling students; many students seemed to just need the spark that comes from individual attention and care, and knowing that someone believes in them and cares about them.

We now consider the information provided by the 12 professors we interviewed. The interviews were wide-ranging and included aspects that are relevant to distinguishing student success and failure. As suggested earlier, they had much to say about how mattering is tied to teaching, learning, and both short- and long-term student success. We now elaborate on these professors and what they told us.

Themes Emerging from the Interviews with Professors

Our research was conducted with 12 participants (5 women, 7 men) who varied in the exact nature of their roles: three instructors, eight professors and one lab coordinator. Overall, they had about 18 years of teaching experience on average. The courses they taught were also quite

varied and included language studies, engineering, biology, chemistry, cognitive science, psychology, history, neuroscience, and sociology. Each professor had been recognized with a teaching award at the faculty level, the university level, the provincial level (i.e., OCUFA teaching award) or the national level (i.e., 3M National Teaching Fellowship).

The initial results from this project are quite extensive. They are summarized in our previous article (see Pychyl et al., 2022). We are revisiting these interviews here for two reasons. First, we believe that providing students with a learning environment that saturates them in mattering experiences is vital to their achievement, well-being, and success. Conversely, an environment that is steeped in anti-mattering experiences amounts to a series of barriers and roadblocks that impede student progress, and in many instances, result in otherwise highly capable students seeing goals as impossible and unsupportive environments as insurmountable. Parenthetically, mattering experiences that have accumulated over the years should facilitate student success and their ultimate decisions to pursue further opportunities—but by the same token, accumulated anti-mattering experiences will result in many capable students losing faith in themselves and dropping out as a form of escape.

Second, it became evident to us after examining the responses of the professors in our study that for many of them, their mattering-related teaching philosophies and practices were linked inextricably with a philosophy about the nature of student success and their implicit and explicit views of student success and the characteristics of successful students. Similarly, in the professors' descriptions, anti-mattering experiences were framed in ways that linked these experiences with disengagement and a lack of student progress and disengagement. In short, they endorsed the view that students who are devalued as if they don't matter are being undermined in terms of their prospects for being successful at school— and possibly perhaps in life as well.

It has been proposed that mattering is consequential and powerful (see Flett, 2022) and when it comes to the lives of individual students, some of the power that mattering has derives from the close association it has been shown to have with hope and hopefulness. Research evidence indicates that mattering in adolescents has a very robust link with hope (Somers et al., 2022). Another new investigation by Rose et al. (2023) with 282 university students indicated that anti-mattering is associated positively with hopelessness (r = .55) and a domain-specific measure of social hopelessness (r = .70), and it is associated negatively with scores on the Hope Scale (r = -.50). This association between mattering and hope suggests that mattering is likely a key element of a success orientation, given that success orientation is largely defined by having an optimistic outlook and no need to defensively protect self-worth (see Martin, Marsh, & Debus et al., 2001).

Parenthetically, it should be noted that the Hope Scale is based on the conceptualization of hope proposed by Snyder et al. (2000). Snyder

conceptualized hope not only in terms of agency but also pathways to realizing hope (i.e., strategies invoked to turn hopes into realities). Snyder and associates (2002) also documented the link between hope and academic success in college students. By extension, mattering and hopefulness should entail self-perceptions of agency and an ability to find ways to turn this positive future orientation into successful outcomes.

This view of the powerful role of mattering could be traced to the professors having a generalized and enduring belief in their students and faith in what they can accomplish. They seemed to endorse a perspective that sees struggling students as still capable but in need of instruction and encouragement paired with timely demonstrations of interest in them that foster a sense of mattering and hope. When viewed according to this orientation, educators at these learning institutions are tasked with providing the conditions that will enable students to realize their potential rather than fall by the wayside. This is not to suggest that these professors fail to recognize that students differ markedly in terms of their backgrounds, talents, interests, and acumen. Rather, they recognize that students have remarkably different starting points, but they will also respond favourably to conditions that make them feel good about themselves and bestow a sense of goal-directedness and hope. When students know that educators care about them and their learning, it validates their choices and reinforces their commitment to success.

This orientation is in keeping with conditions hypothesized as central to positive youth development by Eccles and Gootman (2002), who included support for efficacy and mattering as an essential ingredient in the development of young people. This view places a strong emphasis on experiencing situational contexts that promote positive development and associated goals and ambitions. The overarching message here is that student success is a function of not just the students themselves, but also the situations they encounter. If stated in terms of mattering arising from giving value to others, students will benefit the most from environmental contexts that provide opportunities to engage in meaningful roles.

We now turn to what the professors said about students. The mattering project was quite comprehensive and focused on myriad topics and themes, ranging from general to quite specific (e.g., how professors can incorporate an emphasis on mattering promotion in online learning). In the current article, we restrict our focus to four topics: (1) the attributes of successful students, (2) the attributes of less successful students, (3) the perceived impact of professors making students feel like they don't matter, and (4) how an emphasis on mattering can put struggling students back on the path to success.

Successful Students Who Feel Like They Matter

Table 1 lists the attributes that our participants emphasized when asked to describe mattering and what they hope for their students in this regard. In many respects, the characteristics described provide an idealized

view of the successful student and what is possible in terms of student success.

We will not discuss each aspect featured in Table 1, but will instead emphasize some key themes. It became clear to us that a successful student is someone who clearly has a positive learning orientation, and is someone who is motivationally engaged and present in the classroom. They assume active roles as partners in the learning process. There is a clear element of self-determination and autonomy in terms of taking control of their own experiences. Importantly, it was also emphasized that successful students realize that learning can be fun.

The themes in Table 1 also reflect the importance of the learning environment. A key observation was that successful students are in classes that function like an interconnected community. Ideally, cooperation prevails rather than competition and destructive social comparisons.

Perhaps the overarching theme of greatest importance emerging from these interviews was the emphasis on students as people. Successful students tend to feel valued from a demonstrated interest in their learning, but there should also be an interest in them as people and what they hope to accomplish in school and in life. This emphasis is very much in keeping with the notion that students need to feel cared for and cared about (see Pychyl et al., 2022). This emphasis on students as people has a focus on being in the present moment, as typically emphasized by humanistic theorists, but it also involves fostering a positive future orientation and hopeful outlook.

To some extent, the themes identified here fit very well with the notion that mattering is more likely when students feel like they have an individualized experience (for a discussion, see Flett, 2018). Of course, the possibility of individualization is lower when professors have exceptionally large classes, but when this is the case, professors can still convey to students in subtle ways that they matter as people and they are not regarded as simply a number.

Table 1

Characteristics of Successful Students Who Feel Valued Because They Matter

Students who…
• Understand that their learning matters
• Are "present" and engaged in class and conversations
• Feel important to, connected to, and cared about by professors
• Realize that their presence matters
• Feel comfortable to participate in class and give constructive feedback
• Take ownership of their learning and make the content theirs
• Take control (for themselves) and be appropriately assertive
• Have fun
• See themselves as an important part of a "team"
• Will succeed in their course and life (be successful people)
• Can "take away", "walk away", or "carry" what they learned and apply it to other parts of their lives and in the future
• Feel supported, hopeful, and confident
• Form a class community where students interact with each other

Characteristics of Students Who Feel Like They Don't Matter

When our professor participants were asked to describe students who feel like they don't matter, it was clear that they envisioned students who were struggling and unlikely to reach their goals. Indeed, explicit references were made to students with low levels of mattering not doing well, both in their learning and performance, but also in terms of the overall student experience.

The features of students who feel they don't matter are listed in Table 2. This list can serve as an excellent example of what students should seek to avoid becoming during their time at college or university. Students who feel like they don't matter are disengaged as well as bored and distracted. They also were described as having a learning approach that involves focusing on the surface and not engaging in the deeper learning that generates success.

Students low in mattering were described as lacking positive motivation and showing signs of demoralization and learned helplessness. It is important to emphasize these attributes because it fits well with other research with university student samples linking feelings of not mattering with depression (e.g., Dixon & Kurpius, 2008; Etherson et al., 2022; Flett et al., 2012). The lack of motivation and learning difficulties could reflect symptoms of depression such as fatigue, poor concentration, and indecision. The description of students as lacking in self-confidence and endorsing a cynical view of their future suggests that students who do not feel like they matter can have a sense of hopelessness and helplessness.

As described by the professors, the nonverbal tendencies of students can be useful as a signal that their needs are not being met, including their need to matter. We feel it is important for professors to remain alert to these overt indicators, given the likelihood that many students will not seek help and may be hiding difficult internal thoughts behind a stoic exterior. Given that many students do hide behind such a front, it is very revealing when they openly express negative emotions.

Table 2

Characteristics of Students Who Feel Like They Don't Matter

Performance Orientation
Students who… • Do not tend do well • Believe they do not belong there, are unable to succeed, and their efforts do not matter • Become withdrawn and listless, and show symptoms of fatigue • Resort to more superficial learning over deep learning • Exhibit dilatory behaviour (e.g., not handing in assignments) • Display a noticeable "falling off" in their behaviour • Stop showing up to class, become "ghosts"
Displays of Negative Affect
• Believe there is no point in trying and/or express negative beliefs about themselves (e.g., they are dumb or stupid) • Display frustration, anger, or sadness • Openly express/convey being unhappy or unsatisfied with the professor's answers to their questions or requests
Classroom Demeanor
• Attend class merely out of obligation • Do not take notes or pay attention unless it seems especially important • Show non-verbal behaviours of disengagement or demoralization in face-to-face situations (such as their body language) • Distance themselves (i.e., come in late, sit in the back, talk a lot) • Do other things in class (e.g., watching YouTube videos) • Complain about other courses • Must be approached and coaxed and encouraged when asked to form groups • Openly seem to challenge the professor to hear them and see them as a person

The Impact on Students When Professors Fail to Promote and Express Mattering

The material in Table 3 extends the themes found in Table 2 to include a representative sample of the myriad costs and consequences professors identified when asked to indicate what happens when they fail to promote mattering. This is a representative sample of what our participants told us after being able to reflect extensively on this topic. Arguably, it is this focus that most directly reinforced the notion that failure to convey mattering was tantamount to failing the students. Professors identified numerous ways that feelings of not mattering impacted students (e.g., switching out of programs) but also their overall outcome (e.g., graduation rates).

Experiences and feelings of not mattering were seen as broadly undermining motivation. Students were portrayed as dejected and demoralized, but even more troubling were accounts of students not caring due to an abiding sense that no one cares and their college or university does not care. This suggests that failure and demoralization can become quite overgeneralized in students who feel like they don't matter. The negative impacts are also clearly evident in the classroom. Our participants cited various ways that the sense of not mattering becomes reflected in diminished participation, involvement, and engagement.

Table 3

Perceived Impact of Professors Failing to Promote Mattering Among Students

Failure Implications
• Lower likelihood of wanting to continue in their program • Lower academic success • Switching programs, transferring schools, or dropping out • Lower graduation rates • Belief that they do not belong at university, are unable to succeed, and their efforts do not matter (i.e., helplessness)
Motivational Costs and Consequences
• Reduced motivation due to demoralization, detachment, and despondency • Less effort put into assignments and studying • Not caring anymore • Feel that the institution does not care • Undermined self-confidence
Impeding Learning
• Negative impact on student learning • Resorting to inefficient methods of studying and exam preparation
Classroom Consequences
• Dampens classroom interaction and participation • Students stop engaging in the material, discussions, and conversations • Students become detached and easily distracted • The class will not matter to the student
Emotional Costs and Impact on Well-Being
• Negatively impacts their feelings of mattering (e.g., telling a student the subject is not "for" them) • Negatively impacts the perception of their university experience • Negative effects on health and well-being, including mental health (e.g., panic attacks, stress, sickness) • Creates a sense that their presence does not matter

Mattering as a Tool for Improvement

Given our premise that feelings of mattering and mattering-related experiences facilitate student success, it should be the case that interventions designed to enhance a sense of mattering should have the potential to improve students' well-being and confidence, but also put them on a track for improved performance. The professors in our study were also asked to report on specific mattering-related practices that they routinely put into practice when it becomes known that students are not meeting their own goals and expectations and are not living up to the expectations of other people.

Our 12 participants were able to provide an extensive list of tangible measures and suggestions for providing a boost to these students. Award-winning professors conveyed a willingness and ability to adapt their approach as needed. Their suggestions are shown in Table 4. It is clear from this list that these suggestions apply to students at most levels and could easily be implemented to address the needs of younger students.

Certain proposed interventions clearly reflect the components of the mattering construct in terms of students needing to know they merit attention and that people are interested in them and their development. Specific themes include letting students know that they were noticed and expressing genuine interest and empathy, including a stated awareness of what it means to be a student and the stressors they must contend with and balance.

The need to be proactive was reflected across various topics. Professors especially highlighted reaching out to students, either in person or through having their teaching assistant initiate contact. This less direct approach reflected the professors' sensitivity to students often being more forthcoming and less defensive when speaking with another student.

The other main category that emerged was offering to provide additional resources, which is another way for professors to signal they care about their students. This can entail reminders about various resources available to students and encouraging their use.

When it comes to invoking mattering as a way to boost student morale and engagement, explicit value statements directed to students that reflect mattering (e.g., everybody counts, everybody matters in this class) can be quite effective. Also, explicit statements that establish mattering as a value and criterion for facilitating success heightens the sense that everyone is accountable for promoting a shared "mattering mission" and this mission explicitly mandates treating students as if they don't matter is simply not acceptable. But ultimately, students need to be shown they matter through actions and interactions with those who wish to convey to them their value and that someone has an interest in their development and well-being. This can be effective even if they come in the form of small gestures and considerations that reflect a connection with their professors.

Our emphasis on mattering qualifies previous statements about the need to provide students with accepting environments, as espoused by

pioneer Carl Rogers (1965). Obviously, acceptance is important — especially when framed as students having unconditional worth. We maintain that students will benefit to a greater degree from environments that project care and interest in them, and provide them with various opportunities to build a sense of mattering by giving to others and to their programs.

Table 4

Mattering-Related Interventions for Less Successful Students

- Make space and listen
- Make it known that the invitation is there for when students are ready
- Let students know that they can always come to you
- Let students know you noticed them (e.g., a change in their behaviour such as atypical absence or dilatoriness)
- Express empathy, genuine interest, and concern for what it means to be a student
- Reach out to and check in with the individual student by reaching out to them (e.g., have TAs pull the student aside and check in; through email; following up after class; or inviting them to come by office hours)
- Pull in and engage students you think are not feeling well
- Offer additional time, supports, and opportunities
- Try to "pile on" the resources and refer students to university support services (if and when appropriate)
- Proactively ask if something is going on or has happened, and if there is anything you can do to help
- Be reflective and consider what you could or would do differently as part of a commitment to adaptability

When the themes listed in Tables 1 through 4 are considered as a whole, it should be clear that college and university professors have the potential to profoundly impact student success. However, this impact is double-edged; professors who treat their students like they matter can be a source of hope and inspiration, but professors who do not can be destructive in ways that students may not be able to overcome. A future project that

could prove quite revealing would be to survey professors and distinguish between faculty members who are aware of their potential impact and those who are oblivious or indifferent to their potential impact.

Additional Considerations and Future Directions

Our discussion about the role of mattering in student success did not extensively consider which students will be most in need of mattering experiences. It is believed that the need to matter is universal (see Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981) and, as such, this need to matter is something that all students have in common. However, it is no doubt the case that some students have a greater need to matter and to feel significant than do others. It has been suggested previously that visiting international students may be especially high in the need to matter (for an analysis, see Flett et al., 2019). Researchers have not yet assessed individual differences in the importance of mattering to others, but the degree of importance is certainly going to be heightened among students who feel disconnected and who are eager for any signs that their presence is valued.

Students dealing with exceptional circumstances will also likely have a heightened need to matter and feel supported. Although there has been no research on mattering with respect to students with learning disabilities, the benefits of having a supportive environment for students with learning disabilities have been well-documented (see Zilvinskis et al., 2021). However, mattering involves a sense of being cared for and cared about in ways that go beyond what is currently being assessed by measures of having a supportive environment.

The characteristics of the institution should also be considered in terms of how they may impact the need of certain students to matter to other people but also matter to the institution. This key point was underscored in an analysis of students who took courses at a satellite location away from the main campus. Shelly (2014) described students at a small branch campus writing center located 45 minutes away from the main campus who needed to achieve a pre-determined grade point average of 2.0 or higher over one year to be eligible to attend classes at the main campus. Overt attempts to show these students they matter and are valued could help address the sense of marginalization felt by some students.

Along similar lines, a recent analysis of first-generation female students with food insecurity concluded that they are "starving to matter," and that satisfying this need was essential to their health, well-being, and educational success (see Armstrong, 2021). It may indeed be the case that 'mattering is all that matters' for some students, in the sense they simply will not thrive without it. The good news is that the future should be bright for students with a strong sense of mattering to the people who *matter to them*, and also feel like they matter to their educational institution.

Ideally, students attend post-secondary school at an institution that values mattering, and this value is embraced, promoted, repeatedly conveyed to students, and reinforced by people throughout the school.

Much of our focus was on the values and practices of professors for promoting mattering, but Prilleltensky et al. (2020) have also discussed creating an organizational culture of mattering. They developed a measure to tap this culture of mattering at colleges and universities, and showed that the perceptions of the culture itself can be assessed with a reasonable degree of reliability and validity. The overarching premise of this research is that creating a culture of mattering is central to organizational success. However, it should be noted that organizational culture can also convey a sense of not mattering and promote anti-mattering feelings, as illustrated by research on graduate student feelings and perceptions by Lyken-Segosebe et al. (2019).

Colleges and universities are constantly in search of reliable and valid metrics that can be used to quantify the student experience. Here again, mattering offers a key alternative to the status quo. Student surveys can be modified to assess the extent to which students feel they matter and used to evaluate program and service delivery. When mattering is reflected in assessments and evaluations, this can add to a sense of accountability for those charged with improving postsecondary offerings, and levels of mattering can be tracked as a source of evidence to establish that effective improvements have been put in place.

It is important to reiterate that students can contribute to an environment that generates mattering experiences by actively engaging in activities and opportunities that benefit their fellow students as well as the institution as a whole. But is important that colleges and universities find roles for students and raise awareness of the opportunities available to them so that the sense of agency and efficacy that comes from giving to others can be nurtured.

We would be remiss if we failed to again underscore that a key requirement of a positive student experience is not being exposed to anti-mattering experiences. Institutional values need to reflect positive mattering experiences, but there must also be a strong and clear emphasis on limiting practices that make students feel devalued, invisible and irrelevant. This focus should be extended to various settings, including the activities of fraternities and sororities, given evidence that students have reported anti-mattering experiences in such contexts (see Garcia, 2020). Anti-mattering can also come in the form of being unresponsive to student claims and allegations of mistreatment so that students end up feeling demeaned, devalued, and unheard. Proactive efforts to provide mattering-related experiences will be undermined if students are exposed to insensitive treatment that makes them feel unimportant. Unfortunately, too many students internalize these experiences, and they come to believe the treatment they have endured is a reflection of their flaws, defects, and inadequacies.

The first author has spent some time as an Associate Dean, and this has afforded a unique perspective on why mattering must be promoted and how efforts to do so can make a profound difference. The benefits of this

will be felt not just by individual students, but also by colleges and universities as a whole. Are the costs of such initiatives worth it? Schlossberg (1987) points to an answer, stating that when students know they matter, educators and educational leaders know they have been successful and that their efforts as educators are worthwhile. It is certainly worth it to have faculty and teaching assistants who realize their value by giving value to their students; for example it may protect these educators from stress and burnout. But there are even more tangible benefits at the institutional level. If feelings of mattering are resulting in greater student success, as expected, the impact of a shared sense of mattering will become reflected positively in rates of student retention. It is also a valuable theme that colleges and universities can tout when recruiting not only students, but also top faculty members and potential donors.

Finally, educational institutions also value the commitment and long-term engagement of alumni. Former students should be much more likely to stay engaged with their alma mater if they developed the strong bonds and attachments that come from striving and succeeding at a place where they felt important and cared for.

Summary

In the current paper, we presented the argument that mattering is vital to student success and summarized research that supports this contention. It was suggested that mattering has learning and motivation benefits not just for students, but also their professors and the institution as a whole. We also examined mattering and student success by considering the views of award-winning faculty members who were interviewed about various themes and aspects related to mattering and their teaching practices. Collectively, the insights provided paint an encouraging picture of energized students who feel like they matter, which contrasts sharply with the image of demoralized students who feels like they don't matter. The professors in this research made explicit references to student success versus failure as related outcomes, and the attributes generated fit very well with classic accounts of students who thrive and flourish versus those who struggle and suffer, typically in silence.

Admittedly, the portion of the title of this article that refers to mattering as "the secret to success" is a misnomer in the sense that it is clearly no secret—the need for students to feel like they matter was widely acknowledged and recognized among our 12 professors. It is also not a secret at the many educational institutions around the world that value mattering and that have taken steps to reflect mattering in their practices, procedures, and policies. Unfortunately, however, too many people in positions to implement it and harness its power are yet to recognize the power of mattering and act accordingly, even though a focus on mattering does not require many resources and it can be addressed in cost-effective ways. Opportunities to put mattering into practice have been neglected at too many colleges and universities, despite its enormous potential for change and growth (for a discussion, see Flett, 2022). It is also the case that

mattering should be routinely added to many research studies with a focus on individual differences in self-worth.

At the same time, readers would be quite justified if they challenged certain conclusions reached in this article. Clearly, our view reflect our subjective biases and interpretations. Readers could also conclude that certain themes in the current paper about students needing to be valued seem obvious, and thus have limited information value or utility. However, the reality is that mattering still does not get as much emphasis as it deserves, especially given that mattering has been described as powerful, unique, and rich in knowledge mobilization potential (see Flett, 2022). Interventions for students based on positive psychology are missing a key element if mattering is not incorporated, Also, at a broad level, when considering student learning and student success, relational factors typically do not get enough attention. This article represents our call for a much greater emphasis on the social side of student success.

Hopefully, advocacy of this type will heighten awareness of how students can grow and experience greater success if they feel like they matter to others and they matter to their school. Timely initiatives that result in students feeling important, seen and heard can also be useful as a way of preventing anxiety and depression among postsecondary students. Mattering is not a panacea for everything and for everybody, but there is more to be gained than lost by making it part of a foundation that colleges and universities can build upon.

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Ethics approval for the professors project was obtained from Carleton University.

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