Becoming a Care-Ready Institution: Operationalizing a Relational Framework for Student Success

Jason Rivera
Ball State University

In contemporary higher education, outcomes-driven imperatives often privilege efficiency, data, and technology over relational dynamics that underpin student thriving. This article advances the argument that care, understood relationally, institutionally, and structurally, constitutes a form of capital with measurable impact on equity. Building on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital and Yosso's (2005) framework of community cultural wealth, I introduce the C.A.R.E. Framework (Community and Connection, Accountability and Advocacy, Reflection and Relationships, Equity and Empowerment). Developed through years of leadership practice, this model conceptualizes care as a value and a resource, positioning care-readiness as a strategic and moral imperative for higher education.

Keywords: care, student success, capital, cultural wealth

INTRODUCTION

My understanding of *care* in higher education did not begin in a conference room or scholarly text, but in the quiet, ordinary moments of growing up. I am one of several siblings who experienced a childhood marked by instability and systemic neglect. Yet I remained in school, while my siblings did not. We shared the same home, the same schools, and the same economic precarity. What made my educational path feel viable when theirs did not?

Over time, a pattern emerged. I had encountered educators who saw beyond performance and focused on my becoming. An elementary school teacher who encouraged me to dream. A middle school teacher who challenged my intellect. A high school counselor who demystified the path to college. A professor who asked how I was really doing and refused to let me disappear. These were not grand gestures, but moments of presence, consistency, and belief. They made me feel visible. They made me believe I mattered.

These personal reflections began to echo throughout my professional journey. As I worked to improve outcomes for students from marginalized communities, especially students who looked like me, i.e., Afro-Latino, Brown, low-income, and male, I recognized the same voids I had once experienced. Students were enrolling but not thriving. The data indicated a "retention problem," but their affect and behavior pointed to a deeper issue: *disconnection*. Institutions mistook compliance for support, and policy for care.

These insights shaped my doctoral research, which examined the role of care in shaping outcomes for historically underserved students. I came to understand that care is not merely emotional labor or interpersonal niceness. It is a conduit; a means through which students access advocacy, information, belonging, and structure. When present, care scaffolds persistence. When absent, it leaves students navigating opaque and impersonal systems alone. In this way, care functions as capital.

Since completing that work, I have served in senior leadership roles at both public and private institutions, where I began developing what would eventually become the C.A.R.E. Framework, which is an acronym for Community and Connection, Accountability and Advocacy, Reflection and Relationships, and Equity and Empowerment. This framework was born out of necessity: a desire to move care from the interpersonal to the institutional, from the intuitive to the intentional. It offers one approach for structuring relational, equity-centered work in ways that are measurable, sustainable, and strategic.

What follows is a theoretical grounding of care-as-capital, a detailed unpacking of the C.A.R.E. Framework, and concrete examples of how it can be enacted across advising, curriculum, and policy. I write this not only as a scholar-practitioner, but as someone who knows what it means to be held together by someone else's care. I hope to offer a scaffold for building not only student-ready institutions (McNair et al., 2022), but also *care-ready* ones.

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Higher education is saturated with rhetoric about innovation, excellence, and transformation. Yet the daily operations of most institutions remain constrained by scarcity logics, hierarchical structures, and bureaucratic surveillance (Lynch et al., 2009; Ahmed, 2012). Within this ecosystem, care is often dismissed as intangible or sentimental, relegated to hallway conversations, after-hours texts, or the invisible labor of those who "go above and beyond." When examined more closely, however, care is not peripheral to student success; it is foundational. I argue that it should be understood and operationalized as a form of capital.

I define care as capital: a relational, institutional, and affective resource that enables student success and thriving. It is not merely emotional support or interpersonal kindness; it is a mechanism through which students access stability, belonging, guidance, and advocacy. In this way, care can and must be leveraged as part of an institution's student success strategy.

This framing builds on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital, which conceptualizes education as structured by forms of economic, social, and cultural power that often reproduce inequality. Extending this foundation, critical scholars such as Tara Yosso (2005) introduced the Community Cultural Wealth framework, naming the navigational, familial, resistant, and linguistic capital that students of color carry into educational spaces. I position care alongside these forms, not as goodwill or charity but as a structural condition that can either enable or constrain student agency.

When present, care-capital buffers alienation, scaffolds belonging, and opens pathways to persistence. When absent, especially for students from first-generation, low-income, and racially minoritized backgrounds, it exacerbates institutional opacity and emotional disengagement.

In my doctoral research and subsequent years of practice-based inquiry, I sought to understand how care operates not simply as an interpersonal gesture but as a resource that can be cultivated, exchanged, and institutionalized to advance equity and student success. Through this exploration, informed by the literature on student success, belonging, and community cultural wealth (e.g., Yosso, 2005; Felten & Lambert, 2020; Baxter Magolda, 2009), I came to see that care functions as both a conduit and a resource, ultimately taking shape as its own form of capital. From this recognition, I identified four interdependent forms of care-capital that demonstrate how institutions can intentionally structure and sustain care in ways that promote student thriving.

Relational Capital

Relational Capital centers on the quality of human connections that students form with faculty, staff, and peers. These trusting relationships act as both a safety net and a springboard, fostering belonging and motivating persistence. When students know that someone on campus sees them, believes in them, and is invested in their success, they are more likely to engage in help-seeking behaviors, demonstrate resilience in the face of setbacks, and develop a stronger sense of academic and social anchoring (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Felten et al., 2023; Daly et al., 2021; Jensen & Jetten, 2015). For example, a commuter student who initially felt isolated began informally checking in with a faculty member after class. Over time, what started as brief academic conversations expanded into broader discussions about balancing work and school. This

sustained connection ultimately became the anchor that kept the student enrolled during a semester when they seriously considered withdrawing. Such experiences mirror research on relationship-rich education, which underscores the critical role of faculty-student interaction in fostering persistence and belonging (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Kuh, 2008).

Navigational Capital

Navigational Capital refers to the knowledge, strategies, and insider cues that caring institutional actors provide to help students move through the often opaque structures of higher education. This form of care-capital is particularly vital for students from historically marginalized backgrounds who may lack inherited access to the "hidden curriculum" of college (Yosso, 2005; Rivera, 2015). Faculty and staff who provide navigational support translate complex processes into manageable steps and demystify institutional culture. For instance, when a first-generation student expressed uncertainty about how to declare a major, a residence hall staff member not only clarified the process but also explained the role of advisors and shared strategies for approaching faculty office hours. What could have remained an overwhelming and discouraging obstacle instead became a navigable pathway. Such examples align with scholarship highlighting how navigational supports expand institutional know-how and empower students to persist in spaces not originally designed with them in mind (Collier & Morgan, 2008; Jack, 2019).

Reflective Capital

Reflective Capital captures the developmental growth that occurs when students are invited into intentional reflection on their identities, values, and goals. Through opportunities to critically connect their lived experiences with their academic journeys, students cultivate self-authorship and deepen their sense of purpose (Baxter Magolda, 2009; Mezirow, 2000). This form of care-capital emerges when faculty, advisors, or mentors create structured spaces for students to make meaning of their learning. For example, in a first-year seminar, students were asked to link their personal histories to the broader social issues they were studying. One student, who had long doubted their capacity for higher education, realized that their lived experience with housing insecurity provided unique insights into public policy debates. Supported by the reflective framework of the course, the student came to see their background as a source of strength rather than a deficit. This resonates with research on reflective pedagogy, which emphasizes the developmental benefits of meaning-making practices that help students integrate their lived experience with academic learning (Ash & Clayton, 2009; Baxter Magolda & King, 2012).

Structural Capital

Structural Capital represents the institutionalized practices and systems that embed care into the fabric of higher education. Unlike relational, navigational, or reflective forms, which are enacted interpersonally, structural capital ensures that care is predictable, sustainable, and accessible across the institution. This form of care-capital is visible in holistic advising models that integrate academic, financial, and personal support; trauma-informed leave and return policies that prioritize well-being; and early alert systems designed to provide proactive rather than punitive outreach (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Schreiner, 2014). One institution, for instance, reimagined its academic probation process by replacing punitive warning letters with a proactive support model. Rather than simply notifying students of their probationary status, the institution automatically connected them with an advisor, enrolled them in a success workshop, and offered financial coaching. Students reported feeling supported rather than shamed, and retention rates among the cohort improved measurably. These kinds of systemic interventions echo research on high-impact institutional practices, which stress the importance of embedding equity-minded care into policies and structures (Kuh et al., 2010; McNair et al., 2020).

Interdependence and Integration

Taken together, these four forms of care-capital create a multi-layered architecture of support. Relational capital may be the entry point for trust; navigational capital transforms that trust into guidance; reflective capital ensures that students grow from these experiences; and structural capital embeds the

practices that sustain care across cohorts and generations. When cultivated intentionally, these forms move care beyond isolated acts of kindness and reposition it as a strategic, equity-centered resource embedded in institutional culture. In this framing, care becomes not ancillary to academic life but a form of capital and something that can be cultivated, exchanged, and expanded to advance student thriving and institutional transformation.

Crucially, these forms of care-capital are not equitably distributed. Students from privileged backgrounds often benefit from invisible scaffolding such as unspoken norms, insider knowledge, and affirmations of fit. In contrast, marginalized students frequently rely on inconsistent and informal acts of care to navigate systems never designed for them.

Likewise, the burden of care labor is unequally distributed. Women, educators of color, LGBTQ+ staff, and first-generation professionals disproportionately shoulder the emotional and relational work that supports students (Griffin et al., 2013; Ahmed, 2012; hooks, 1994). This labor is often uncompensated, under-recognized, and sometimes penalized when it conflicts with dominant definitions of productivity.

For institutions committed to equity, care must be treated not as a soft skill or private virtue but as an institutional asset that is named, resourced, structured, and assessed. Otherwise, equity initiatives risk becoming disconnected from the human relationships on which student success depends. To bridge this gap, I developed the C.A.R.E. Framework, a structure for translating the ethic of care into institutional architecture. It resists the notion of care as individualized goodwill and instead situates it within systems, cultures, and strategies.

THE C.A.R.E. FRAMEWORK – NAMING AND STRUCTURING CARE

As my leadership in student success deepened, I found myself searching for a shared language to describe what many educators were doing intuitively but inconsistently. Across roles and institutions, I witnessed mighty yet isolated acts of care: a professor emailing a student who missed class, an advisor walking a student to counseling, a coach pausing mid-meeting to ask, “How are you really doing?” These moments established trust and signaled belonging. Yet they were too often undocumented, unstructured, and unaccounted for, or they were relegated to the margins of institutional strategy.

This raised a critical question: *What would it take to structure care to ensure it is not left to chance?* The C.A.R.E. Framework emerged as an answer to that question. It does not reduce care to a checklist or instrument. Instead, it offers a relational architecture that can guide institutions in embedding care into policies, practices, and culture. It scaffolds the deeply human work of supporting student success.

C.A.R.E. is an acronym that identifies four interrelated domains of practice:

C — Community and Connection

Belonging is not a byproduct of learning; it is a prerequisite. Research consistently shows that a strong sense of belonging improves motivation, engagement, and persistence, especially for students from historically marginalized backgrounds (Strayhorn, 2019). But for many first-generation, LGBTQ+, racially minoritized, and low-income students, belonging is not automatic. It must be intentionally cultivated.

This domain calls on institutions to create ecosystems of connection and to create spaces where students are seen, heard, and valued in their full identities. This includes physical and virtual environments that invite students to bring their whole selves into academic life.

Relational structures may include cohort programs, peer mentoring, affinity spaces, and identity-based resource centers. But connection also lives in micro-practices: faculty learning students’ names, advisors asking about family responsibilities, or classroom rituals that honor student voice. These signals of recognition accumulate to shape a student’s experience of inclusion.

A — Accountability and Advocacy

Care is not the opposite of rigor; it is the precondition that makes rigor sustainable. Yet care is often mistaken for leniency or over-accommodation. This domain reclaims care as an expression of deep accountability: to students, to equity, and to institutional mission.

Accountability begins with institutions owning their outcomes. This means disaggregating data to expose institutional performance gaps (Bensimon & Malcom, 2012; Bensimon & Spiva, 2020), involving students in policy development, and embedding advocacy roles such as ombudspersons, equity navigators, or success coaches, into the organizational fabric.

Advocacy, in this context, is not reactive. It is structural. It involves redesigning policies (e.g., probation, financial aid holds, grading norms) that unintentionally punish the most vulnerable. It means being accountable not only to enrollment targets but to student well-being and the outcomes that honor the promise of college admission.

R — Reflection and Relationships

Reflection is one of the most underutilized tools in student success. Yet meaning-making, especially when supported by caring, authentic relationships, is central to identity development, motivation, and academic direction.

Too often, reflection is siloed within orientation sessions, writing prompts, or conduct processes. But what if advisors invited students to map their personal stories alongside their degree plans? What if faculty made space for students to connect lived experiences to course content and future aspirations? What if coaches paused to ask not only *what* students are doing, but *who* they are becoming?

These are not ancillary acts. They are the foundation of **reflective capital**, the internal capacity to derive purpose from experience, guided by relational trust. Human relationships are not merely delivery mechanisms for services; they are the infrastructure of care. It is through meaningful connections that students feel seen, heard, and valued.

Mentoring, coaching, and faculty engagement are not optional add-ons; they are research-backed strategies for fostering belonging, resilience, and persistence (Felten & Lambert, 2020; Baxter Magolda, 2009). When institutions center reflection *in relationship*, they empower students to chart purposeful paths rooted in their identities, aspirations, and strengths.

E — Equity and Empowerment

Care that ignores systems of oppression is insufficient. This domain affirms that care must be equity-driven and justice-oriented. That means interrogating the policies, power structures, and resource distributions that burden some students while benefiting others.

Empowerment is not about making students resilient to inequity. It is about redesigning systems, so they don't have to be. This includes co-creating curricula, engaging students in governance, and practicing culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris & Alim, 2017). It also requires that we care for the caregivers: the faculty and staff, especially those from historically marginalized groups, who often carry the emotional and relational load of supporting students (Griffin et al., 2013; Ahmed, 2012; hooks, 1994).

To empower is to share power. It means designing not just for access, but for dignity. Institutions serious about care must center those most impacted by inequity, not only in words, but in structures.

Together, these four domains: Community and Connection, Accountability and Advocacy, Reflection and Relationships, and Equity and Empowerment offer a strategy for moving care from sentiment to structure. The C.A.R.E. Framework invites institutions not to "add more," but to align differently. It affirms what many educators already know: that care is not extracurricular. It is essential infrastructure for student success.

C.A.R.E. IN PRACTICE: INSTITUTIONAL APPLICATION ACROSS DOMAINS

The power of a framework lies not only in its conceptual clarity but also in its practical application. The C.A.R.E. Framework was not born solely from theory; it emerged from the day-to-day work of translating equity values into systems, culture, and infrastructure. Over more than two decades in public and private higher education institutions, I have seen how embedding care-centered practices can shift outcomes, restore trust, and build cultures of belonging. The following institutional examples show how care can move from a personal ethic to a systemic strategy when it is not only expressed but operationalized.

In the realm of advising and coaching, C.A.R.E. centers the relational capital at the core of the student experience while also fostering reflective capital. At many institutions, advising has been reduced to a transactional process focused on degree audits and course registration. Under a C.A.R.E. approach, advising is reimagined as one of the most relationally significant practices in a student's college journey. At a midsize public university, we transformed advising into a relationship-rich experience grounded in students' narratives, strengths, and aspirations. Advisors received training in coaching strategies, cultural humility, and reflective inquiry. Instead of beginning with "What's your major?" they began with "What matters to you, and how can we help you build toward it?" Students engaged with tools such as values inventories, story-mapping, and reflective journaling, helping them locate meaning in their academic paths and take ownership of their choices. The results were tangible: students described feeling more connected and empowered, and advisors reported greater satisfaction and a renewed sense of purpose. This work reflects research showing that sustained, meaningful connections with faculty and staff can dramatically increase student thriving (Felten & Lambert, 2020).

Early alert systems, when framed through C.A.R.E., shift from surveillance to support by activating structural capital in ways that are grounded in relational capital. Traditional early alerts often identify "at-risk" students for intervention in ways that feel punitive or opaque. In contrast, at one institution, we redesigned the process so students heard from someone they already knew (e.g., a success coach, advisor, or peer mentor). Messages were personalized and invitational: "I noticed something may be off and I can help. Let's talk! I want to make sure you are successful this semester." Faculty were re-engaged as relational partners, receiving professional development in strength-based, psychologically attuned communication (Brady et al., 2019) and gaining access to disaggregated data to examine disproportionate impacts of alert-based attrition. Students began to report feeling supported rather than monitored, and interventions became conversations rather than corrections, echoing research that cautions against deficit-based models in favor of culturally sustaining, equity-centered approaches (Brady et al., 2019; Museus & Smith, 2016; Schudde, 2019).

In curriculum and pedagogy, care is embedded in the classroom to cultivate reflective capital, strengthen relational capital, and reinforce navigational capital through transparent, student-centered learning design. Partnering with faculty development centers, we introduced C.A.R.E.-aligned strategies such as "warm syllabi," transparent assignment design, reflection prompts, and community-building rituals. Faculty were encouraged to "connect before content," beginning class with brief emotional check-ins or moments of shared reflection. They also integrated culturally responsive materials, inclusive assessment strategies, and student voice into course design. These were not cosmetic changes; they reshaped classroom climate. Students reported feeling more comfortable participating, finding greater relevance in their learning, and forming stronger relationships with instructors. Such practices align with scholarship demonstrating that when students feel seen and valued in the classroom, they are more likely to persist (hooks, 1994; Rivera, 2015; Gay, 2018; Strayhorn, 2019). Care, in this sense, does not replace content. It changes the conditions under which deep learning becomes possible.

Policy reform offers an opportunity to embed structural capital that ensures equitable access to care. Even the most relational practices can be undermined by exclusionary or opaque rules. Care-ready institutions intentionally design policies that center the student experience and acknowledge human complexity. In one initiative, we conducted equity audits of academic and financial policies such as midterm grade reporting, academic probation, registration holds, and leave-of-absence procedures. Many of these, though well-intentioned, penalize students managing financial insecurity, disability, caregiving responsibilities, or mental health challenges. One particularly impactful change reimagined midterm grades not as a static performance report but as formative feedback tools. Faculty provided comments grounded in growth rather than deficit, and students were invited into conversations with coaches about how to adapt and improve. The midterm became a moment of reflection and support rather than fear and judgment. We also created a cross-functional student care protocol integrating academic, financial, and wellness data to trigger coordinated outreach. These approaches, rooted in trauma-informed and student-centered policy design, marked a shift from policies that sort and punish to those that support and scaffold (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2020; Felten et al., 2023).

Finally, leadership and culture change require modeling structural capital and relational capital at the highest levels. Culture change cannot be left to grassroots efforts alone; leaders must embody the values they hope to scale. At a small, elite private institution, we established reflective leadership circles for deans, cabinet members, and directors to examine how care factored into their decision-making. Were they prioritizing human impact in budget discussions? Naming the invisible labor of care on their teams? Building structures that reinforced, rather than eroded, trust? At a large community college, we embedded C.A.R.E. principles into strategic plans, onboarding protocols, and performance evaluation rubrics. These changes made care measurable and visible, and faculty and staff began to understand that relational work was not only permitted but expected, valued, and rewarded. Most importantly, the internal narrative shifted: care was no longer seen as a "soft" skill or extra effort but as a form of expertise. As Tronto (2013) reminds us, care is not merely a private virtue but a public ethic. When leaders embrace this, institutions can move from pilot programs to paradigm shifts.

Together, these examples demonstrate that care is not ancillary to student success and equity work, it is their architecture. When institutions build policies, pedagogy, and practices around the multiple forms of care-capital, they do more than improve metrics. They create the conditions where students can truly thrive.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

The C.A.R.E. Framework offers a relational architecture for equity and student success. It centers care not as sentiment or soft skill, but as a strategic, measurable, and institutionalizable force that can be embedded across policy, pedagogy, and practice. Yet, like all frameworks, C.A.R.E. is not a finished product. Its strength lies in its ability to be refined, translated, and transformed by diverse institutional contexts and communities. To move the work forward, several key areas of research and practice emerge.

Developing Empirical Instruments to Assess Care

While the theory and practice of care are well-grounded in relational and critical scholarship, its institutionalization requires valid and reliable methods of assessment. Future research can focus on developing empirical instruments to measure the presence, perception, and impact of care across advising, instruction, and policy environments. For instance, how do students experience care in faculty interactions? What institutional practices foster or hinder relational trust? Instruments could include qualitative tools (e.g., narrative inquiry, reflective mapping, sentiment analysis) and quantitative measures (e.g., scales for perceived belonging, relational trust, and institutional responsiveness). Longitudinal studies could help identify whether C.A.R.E.-aligned practices correlate with retention, GPA, or psychosocial outcomes over time. These tools would allow institutions to assess care not as anecdotal or "extra," but as an essential component of student success ecosystems.

Exploring C.A.R.E.'s Intersection With Racial Equity Frameworks

While the C.A.R.E. Framework centers equity as one of its core pillars, more research is needed to understand how it explicitly intersects with racial justice frameworks, particularly within Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs) and Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) striving for racial transformation. How does the C.A.R.E. framework align with or challenge other frameworks like Critical Race Theory (CRT), anti-deficit models, or racial battle fatigue literature? What does care look like for Black, Indigenous, and Latinx students when it is racialized, institutionalized, or withheld? How might care be experienced as surveillance in one context and as solidarity in another?

In environments where racialized students routinely navigate microaggressions, stereotype threat, and structural exclusion, the presence or absence of care can profoundly shape their sense of belonging and educational agency. C.A.R.E. must therefore be understood not as racially neutral, but as a framework that either contributes to or disrupts existing racial dynamics depending on its design and application.

This inquiry becomes even more urgent amid the current retrenchment of DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) initiatives across many parts of the U.S. In several states and systems, institutions face increasing political and legal pressure to avoid equity-related terminology, frameworks, or practices. This aversion to

equity language, driven by ideological backlash risks rendering invisible the very structures of injustice that equity work seeks to address. Yet, institutions cannot allow this chilling climate to become an excuse for inaction.

While language and framing may shift for strategic reasons, the responsibility for ensuring equitable outcomes remains. Colleges and universities must still confront disparities in retention, graduation, access to high-impact practices, and campus climate, regardless of whether those efforts are labeled as DEI. The C.A.R.E. Framework offers one path forward, especially in contested contexts, because it emphasizes care as both a humanizing ethic and a strategic mechanism for equity. It enables institutions to continue advancing justice-aligned work even amid rhetorical constraints by focusing on relational accountability, structural change, and the labor of those who enact care on the ground.

Future studies should examine how institutions leverage C.A.R.E. to foster racial healing, affirmation, and justice without co-opting or diluting its intent. Research should also attend to positionality by asking who is permitted or expected to provide care, whose care is legitimized, and how racialized power dynamics shape the labor and visibility of relational work. In doing so, scholars can ensure that C.A.R.E. is not just another neutral framework, but a force for advancing racial equity in both substance and spirit even when that work must navigate politically fraught terrain.

Investigating Leadership's Role in Sustaining Care-Centered Cultures

Transforming care from individual action to institutional culture requires leadership at all levels. Future research should explore how senior leadership, mid-level managers, and faculty governance structures enable or constrain care-centered change. What leadership dispositions and practices foster relational accountability? How do leaders model care in budget decisions, policy prioritization, and crisis response? Ethnographic or case-based research could surface examples of "care-forward leadership" where campus leaders intentionally embed care into strategic plans, organizational design, and performance metrics. This work should also attend to organizational learning, identifying how institutions develop the collective capacity to care consistently, sustainably, and justly.

Aligning C.A.R.E. With High-Impact Practices and Thriving Frameworks

The C.A.R.E. Framework does not replace existing student success paradigms; rather it complements and deepens them. Future research should examine how C.A.R.E. aligns with high-impact practices (HIPs) such as learning communities, first-year seminars, undergraduate research, and service learning (Kuh, 2008), and with student thriving models that emphasize psychological well-being, resilience, and meaning-making (Schreiner, 2014). For example, does embedding C.A.R.E. into undergraduate research mentorships enhance belonging for historically underserved students? Can C.A.R.E.-informed advising improve the efficacy of HIPs by ensuring students have strong relational scaffolds to engage deeply? This line of inquiry invites cross-functional collaboration and encourages institutions to weave C.A.R.E. throughout rather than alongside existing success strategies.

Provocative Questions for Institutional Leaders

Expanding the C.A.R.E. Framework into practice raises strategic and ethical questions that challenge institutional assumptions. These questions go beyond implementation by asking leaders to confront the values, structures, and priorities that shape higher education. Below, I offer a few questions for consideration:

What are we measuring, and why?

Do our success metrics reflect transactional measures of compliance (e.g., retention rates, GPAs, credit accumulation) or do they capture relational outcomes such as belonging, trust, and reflective growth? What dimensions of student experience remain invisible under current data regimes, and how might we measure them differently?

Who is doing the caring, and how are we resourcing them?

Are we recognizing and compensating those, often faculty and staff from historically marginalized groups, who shoulder the emotional and relational work of supporting students? Are institutional workloads, recognition systems, and promotion pathways designed to affirm care as a form of expertise and capital rather than invisible labor?

Where does care live in our organizational charts, budgets, and strategic plans?

Is care an institutional core value embedded in policy and culture, or does it remain rhetorical? Are we investing in structures (e.g., advising models, learning communities, faculty development) that prioritize human connection? How are we holding ourselves accountable for the relational outcomes that shape student success?

These questions are not easily answered, but they are essential. They push leaders to recognize that care is not simply a student success strategy. Care is a cultural disposition, an ethical stance, and a guiding principle for institutional transformation.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD CARE-READY INSTITUTIONS AND A RELATIONAL FUTURE

There is a critical distinction between institutions that say they care and those that are structurally designed to care. The former issue statements during crises, launch short-lived initiatives, or assign small teams to equity work without long-term resourcing. The latter embeds care into the everyday rhythms, rituals, and relationships of institutional life. They treat care not as discretionary or symbolic labor, but as core infrastructure.

The C.A.R.E. Framework emerged not only from professional commitments to equity and student success, but also from personal conviction born of lived experience and sustained by relational encounters that made survival and thriving possible. Across roles and institutions, I have seen how care, when structured and scaled, can shift not only outcomes but culture. The difference, every time, has hinged on one question: was care treated as incidental, or as infrastructural?

Becoming a care-ready institution is not about eliminating rigor or lowering expectations. It is about expanding our definition of excellence to include empathy, dignity, and relational accountability. It is about reimagining advising as an act of meaning-making, designing policies that humanize rather than penalize, and investing in the invisible labor that makes student success possible. It is about building a culture where relationships are not extra, they are expertise.

If we begin to take care seriously as a form of relational, cultural, and structural capital, we can move beyond transactional models of education. We can design systems that don't just help students survive but support them in becoming. We can create institutions that are not only student-ready, but care-ready.

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