



# USING FAIR PROCESS TO BUILD ONLINE GRADUATE STUDENT SERVICES

## USING FAIR PROCESS TO BUILD ONLINE GRADUATE STUDENT SERVICES

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### ABOUT THE IIRP

All humans are hardwired to connect. Just as we need food, shelter, and clothing, human beings also need strong and meaningful relationships to thrive.

Restorative practices is an emerging social science that studies how to strengthen relationships between individuals as well as social connections within communities.

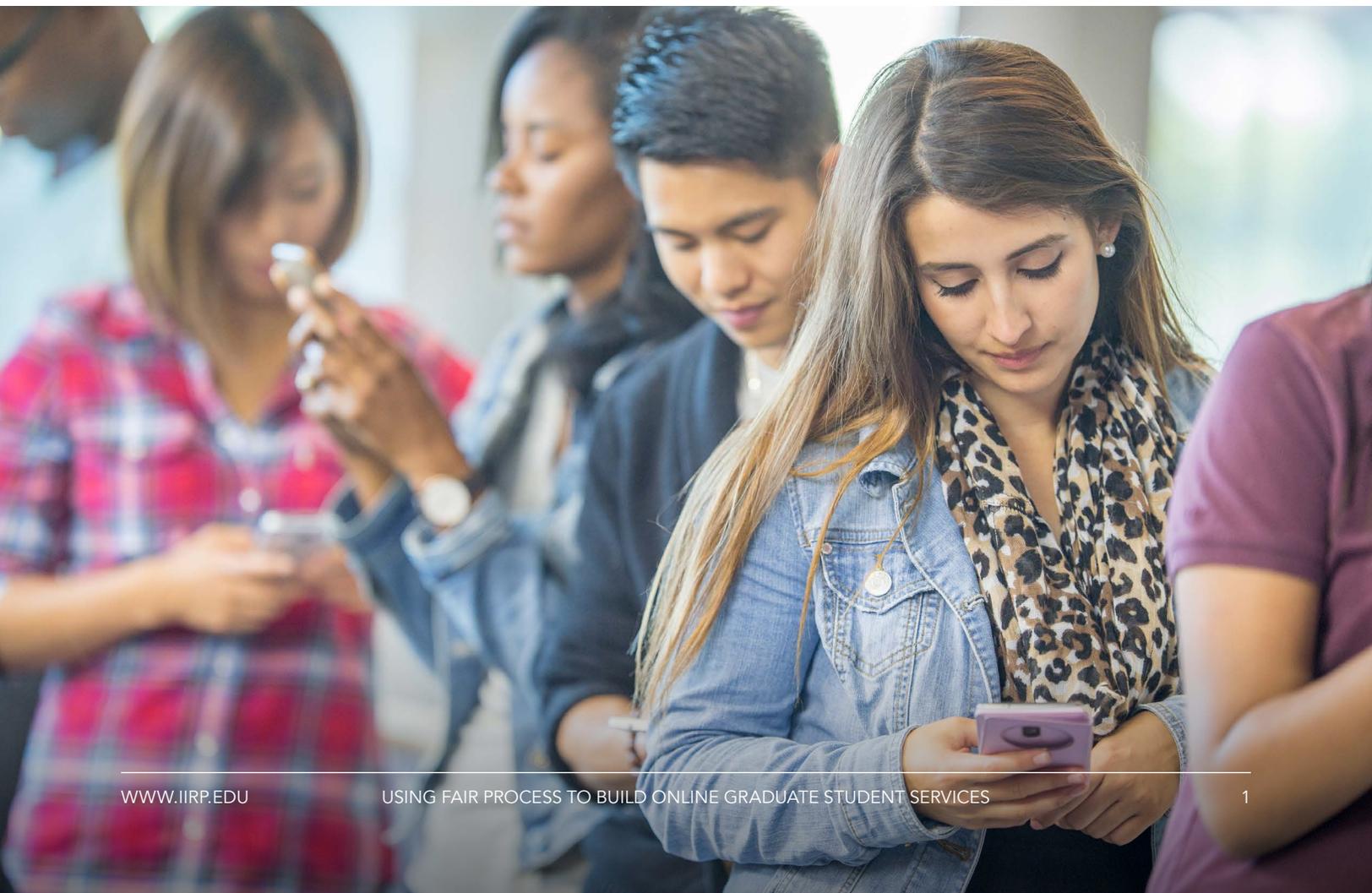
The IIRP Graduate School is the first graduate school wholly dedicated to restorative practices. IIRP faculty are the world's leading experts in the ideas and competencies they teach. They help students tailor their studies and facilitate meaningful online engagement with fellow students from around the world. Courses are online, allowing students to study where they live and work.

Based in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, USA, the IIRP has trained more than 75,000 people in 85 countries. Along with our affiliates, partners, and licensed trainers in the United States, Canada, Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and Australia, we are fostering a worldwide network of scholars and practitioners.

**To learn more about the IIRP Graduate School, go to [www.iirp.edu](http://www.iirp.edu).**

# ABSTRACT

This paper will offer the experiences of a specialized graduate school as a model of how to build services for online graduate students through a restorative practices framework, specifically the use of fair process and the crucial role of feedback in all three stages of fair process. Additionally, using fair process and feedback can help institutions to build community by creating strong, ongoing relationships between students, staff, and faculty. These relationships can help with a range of institutional goals such as student satisfaction, retention, and ongoing alumni engagement. While fair process and feedback do have the potential to greatly benefit the student experience and the institution, some challenges to successful implementation will also be discussed. The author will draw on research from others in the field of higher education and use examples and observations from her own experience in creating and improving student services for online graduate students.



# INTRODUCTION

While undergraduate enrollment in the U.S. declined between 2011 and 2018 and continues to be a concern during and following the pandemic, graduate enrollment increased by 8.1% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Yet most student services were created for and continue to focus on undergraduates, even though the needs of graduate students—from the application stage through graduation—can be very different. This is especially true if they are online students. Compared to traditional-aged undergraduates, adult graduate students often enter college with a full-time job and family responsibilities, less time to engage in extracurricular activities, and no perceived need to define their identities (Robertson, 2020). In addition, online- and distance-learning challenges that many adult graduate students may be experiencing for the first time, such as weak technological skills, create new and different needs.

The International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) Graduate School was founded in 2006 in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and offers a Master of Science in Restorative Practices and a Graduate Certificate in Restorative Practices. Restorative practices is an emerging social science that focuses on building and strengthening relationships between individuals and community (IIRP Graduate School, 2020).

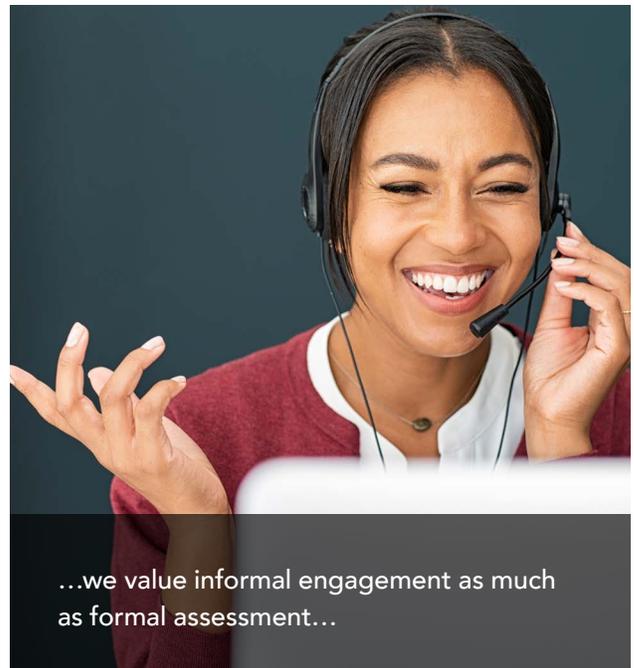
Fair process, which includes the three stages of engagement, explanation, and expectation clarity, is one of the key tools of our restorative environment. Based on their research in business management (1997), W. Chan Kim and Renee Mauborgne used the term *fair process* to identify and define the difference between organizations that successfully worked with their members to achieve better outcomes and those that did not. Simply put, the basic idea is that the more involved

individuals are in the decisions that affect them, the more likely they will trust and cooperate with the organization. In addition, feedback is an important part of engagement and is also available and valuable at the explanation and expectation clarity stages of fair process. At the International Institute for Restorative Practices, we view feedback as essential for people and organizations to learn and grow. Fair process and feedback are both taught in our curriculum and used daily throughout our organization. Using them to support the creation and development of our student services is a natural extension of this environment.

As an employee, I appreciate that fair process gives me a voice in matters that impact me, helps me to understand the rationale for decisions, and guides me in how to meet expectations once decisions are made. I can challenge and recommend changes to existing policies, processes, and procedures; share my experience; and learn from my colleagues when engaged in fair process. In addition, I build relationships with my colleagues while doing this, which continues to benefit me and the organization long after individual decisions are made. We are also expected to learn how to give and receive feedback. Through cycles of feedback, I better understand what I do that supports others and how the impact of my actions may not match my intent, which creates space to clarify and resolve potential misunderstandings.

Because the IIRP intends to practice what we teach, not only do we teach our students about fair process and feedback in their courses but we also use those processes to support our graduate students through the program—in my case, through Student Services. We constantly explore different ways to engage with our students, and we value informal engagement as much as formal assessment, provide new support structures, and

develop ways for our students to connect, not only so they are successful in their program, but also so they gain a sense of belonging with the institution. Specifically, we focus on the use of fair process and feedback as mechanisms to build stronger relationships and a sense of community between online graduate students and the institution. Our model of identifying and building student services may not be applicable or appealing at all graduate programs at other institutions, but some of what we do may be helpful to consider, especially as graduate enrollments are growing in the United States and current services focused specifically on graduate students may be outdated or inadequate.



...we value informal engagement as much as formal assessment...

# GRADUATE STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

Graduate students are a unique population of learners. We know that their needs are different from those of undergraduates, yet their demographics lack a structured definition. Broadly defined in the United States, graduate students are at least 25 years old, work full-time, and study part-time. Interestingly, the demographics of graduate students can be more like those of community college students than undergraduates at four-year colleges and universities: nontraditional aged, non-residential, unprepared (technical, research, and writing skills) (Gillett-Karam, 2016). More than 50% are either married or have other familial obligations and begin their studies after a significant pause in their formal education (Calvano et al., 2019; IIRP Graduate School, 2020; Pascale, 2018; Robertson, 2020; St. Amour, 2019; U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). These factors suggest that this population of students fits their graduate education into already demanding life schedules.

The IIRP Graduate School has had 1660 students enroll in our courses since 2006; it has graduated

248 students with a Master of Science in Restorative Practices, and 340 have received a Certificate in Restorative Practices. For the most recent full academic year, 2020–2021, the IIRP Graduate School had 291 enrolled students; 21 students received a Master of Science in Restorative Practices; 56 students received Certificates in Restorative Practices. Figures 1 and 2 offer a demographic snapshot of our student body during the last four academic years.

Our students are consistently over 40 years of age and from a variety of professions, although teaching is the most common profession. More than 65% are female; more than 50% are white; students identifying as black were consistently the second largest identified category at between 12.28% and 15.74%, averaging 13.76% during that four-year period.

Graduate student motivation is also typically different from that of traditional undergraduate students. As full-time employees who also attend graduate school, graduate students generally seek a degree with a

FIGURE 1: Entering Students by Occupation, AY2017–18 through AY 2020–21

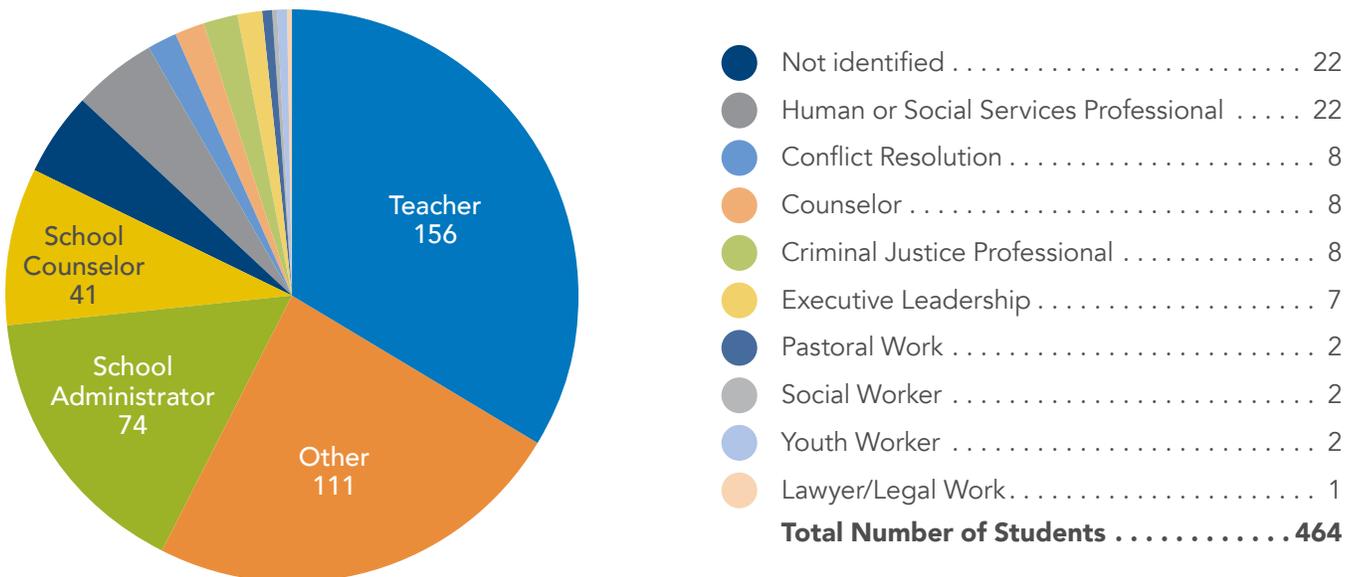
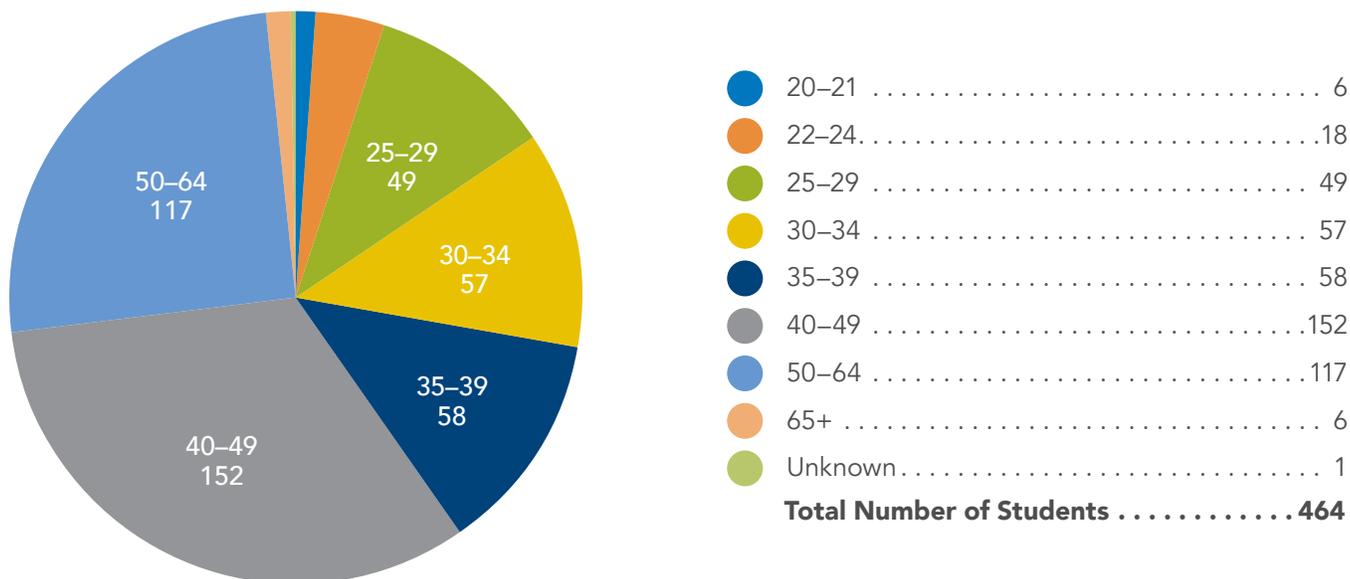


FIGURE 2: Entering Students by Age, AY 2017–18 through AY 2020–21



specific end goal in mind, such as improving chances of promotion in their current workplace or making a career change. They view their education as an obligation or responsibility (Pascale, 2018). Making friends, for example—something undergraduates are more interested in—is not an expressed interest for most graduate students; however during their education, they tend to form relationships with other students who share similar academic and professional interests (Pascale, 2018). The graduate students I work with offer a variant to this research. Results from our Entering Student Survey between 2015 and 2021 reflect that our students tend to pursue graduate studies in restorative practices because they want to help improve communication, relationships, and accountability within their spheres of influence. They are not seeking our degree for the purposes of job promotion or career change, although some do. Because of the subject matter of our degree and their reported motivations for pursuing it, this data suggests that our students might be more receptive to our approach to supporting them in their studies than graduate students at other institutions would be. Yet we still needed to create the means to provide that support.

At least twice in the history of U.S. higher education, the needs of adult students have been recognized with major government initiatives to address them. The GI Bill in 1944 and the Mondale Lifetime Learning Act in 1976 provided financial support for the needs of adult students, but focused primarily on undergraduate education (Robertson, 2020). This begs the question of whether support for graduate students has ever been adequate. Graduate students may also suffer from the general assumption that they shouldn't need any support, as they have already successfully navigated higher education while earning an undergraduate degree.

Despite the projected growth of graduate students, little peer-reviewed research exists that explores the needs of this student population, reinforcing the idea that they have been overlooked as a distinct group in higher education (Calvano et al., 2019). The lack of research makes it challenging to create and provide appropriate support. That challenge is complicated further when graduate students study online.

# COMPLICATING FACTORS OF DISTANCE EDUCATION

Projections suggest a greater growth in part-time than full-time enrollments through 2029, with a heavy emphasis on online and distance education (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Commuter, distance, and online learning create opportunities for an even broader demographic of students to study at their institution of choice and in their specified field of interest. Online learning minimizes the limitations of geographical boundaries, allowing students from across a city or state or around the globe to share experiences and learn together. By providing greater flexibility, online learning also allows a wider variety of people from different generations, professions,

whereas distance students perform those tasks online (Kretovics, 2015). In-person orientations, student affinity groups, extracurricular activities, and study groups provide opportunities for traditional, in-person students to develop relationships with one another and find the support they need. But for adult students who study online, these experiences and supports may not be available to them for the obvious logistical reason that they rarely, if ever, visit campus (Calvano et al., 2019).

The National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) challenges institutions to



The differences in the needs of online graduate students and on-campus students, who are primarily undergraduate students, begin with their applications and continues through the achievement of their degrees.

cultures, and experiences to learn together (Budhai, 2020). But such a varied population can also have a wide range of different needs including linguistic, cultural, technological, or logistical. For example, because our students are studying from countries all over the world, the timing for due dates in courses can be challenging because of time zone differences, requiring regular communication between faculty and students to consistent expectations and fairness for everyone.

The differences in the needs of online graduate students and on-campus students, who are primarily undergraduate students, begin with their applications and continues through the achievement of their degrees. On-campus and traditional students often perform administrative tasks in person, such as applying for school, enrolling in classes, meeting with advisors, and engaging with institutional staff,

determine whether they can simply translate in-person services to online platforms and suggests they continually assess the needs for new services and supports (Budhai, 2020). Kretovics (2015) also questions whether student supports created for traditional-aged college students living on campus meet the needs of online graduate students. In addition to the changing demographics of the student body and their increased enrollment in online learning, institutions must also evaluate and expand their use of technology to better meet their students' evolving technological expertise (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015). As mentioned previously, graduate students may have greater need for technical support than undergraduates. Collectively these studies and reports suggest that institutions need to continually assess if and how well their services match the needs of their online graduate students.

# DELIVERY OF STUDENT SERVICES

Typically, administrative student support is organized into different offices that oversee applications, financial aid, or course registration, for example (Henderson, 2017). This can create a frustrating, confusing, and disjointed experience, particularly for online graduate students who have limited time to perform administrative tasks. In addition, these experiences do little to promote trust or connection with the institution (Henderson, 2017). Larger colleges and universities often organize support into two separate offices of Student Affairs and Student Services: generally Student Affairs oversees academic support (e.g., writing center) and Student Services oversees all other student interests (e.g. housing). Partly because of our small size, the IIRP combines all student services into one office that creates a more streamlined and efficient experience for our students. This includes: inquiry, admissions, enrollment, course selection, structured communication to students throughout year, tuition payment and payment plans, transcript requests, degree audits, awarding of Graduate Certificates, degree conferral, and commencement planning. As a result, students receive answers to their questions more quickly, often from one person who gets to know them and can provide them “personalized, one-on-one support,” which “has proven to be meaningful given the demands of their time and the discomfort that often results from an extended absence from higher education environments” (Calvano et al., 2019, p. 30). In our institution, all prospective students have one point of contact who supports them from initial inquiry through to the time the student is admitted to a program. Upon admission, the student is introduced to the Advisor for Student Enrollment who supports the student through the completion of their program. The student also is assigned a faculty advisor who assists the student with course selection as well

as practical application of restorative practices within their work. This is typical in higher education. However, our faculty and Student Services staff discuss student issues at regularly scheduled group meetings which helps us to identify areas of improvement in our communication with current and prospective students. This not only provides more holistic and individualized support but also allows Student Services professionals to identify institutional gaps in the support offered.

Our staff work closely together to provide our students with prompt, accurate, and consistent support. We are committed to responding to all inquiries within 24 to 48 business hours, clearly conveying office closures and staff out-of-office schedules in outgoing messages and in response to incoming emails. Individual out-of-office messages always provide directions for an alternative contact, so our learners know who to turn to for help. Through continued internal learning opportunities among the institution’s staff, if a student connects with someone outside of Student Services by chance or error, all staff have at least a base level of knowledge they can share with any student before passing the call to the correct Student Services Specialist. Our team also works very closely with our Financial Unit to ensure student records are accurate among the various systems. All staff are also restorative practitioners who employ active listening and ask open-ended questions to ensure we understand what the student needs. We continuously and intentionally ask students for feedback about their experience with us. This can develop stronger relationships between the students and the institution, enhance the students’ sense of belonging, promote student retention, and positively impact student success (Calvano et al., 2019; Colgan, 2019; Henderson, 2017; Tang, 2018).

# SUPPORTING STUDENT SERVICES THROUGH FAIR PROCESS

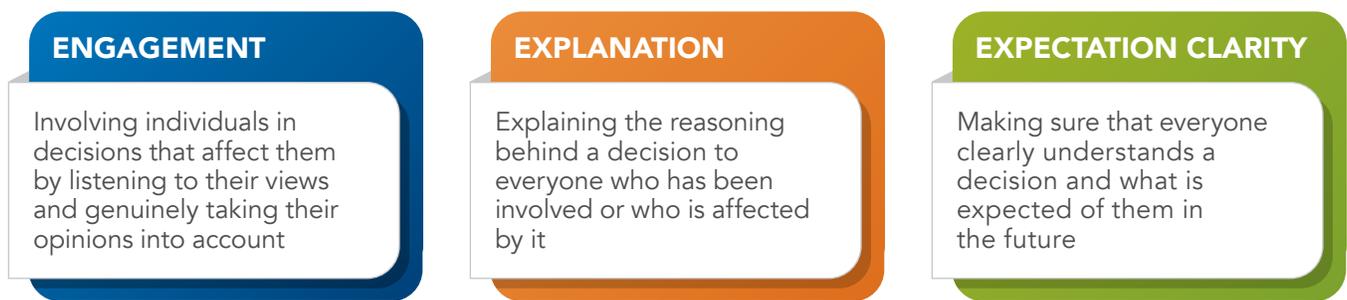
Colleges and institutions often make changes and decisions that impact students but fail to include students in the decision-making process (Colgan, 2019). Kim and Mauborgne (1997) suggest that fair process requires people in positions of authority to engage with those impacted by decisions, explain the reason for decisions, and provide expectation clarity to ensure individuals have an understanding of how to meet established expectations (see Figure 3).

For our office of Student Services, engaging with students about decisions that impact them supports “[t]he fundamental hypothesis of restorative practices,” which is “people are happier, more cooperative and productive, and more likely to make positive changes in behavior when those in authority do things *with* them, rather than *to* them or *for* them” (Wachtel, 2016). Fair process offers a way for institutions to learn to work with their graduate students to make changes or create new supports. In doing so, it also develops relationships and promotes a sense of connectedness, particularly in online spaces. Fair process establishes and strengthens trust among decision-makers and those affected by those decisions (Kim & Mauborgne, 1997).

Fair process creates a continuous cycle of engagement, feedback, and information sharing with graduate students, which obviously is ideal for anyone

trying to find regular ways to collect helpful data. All three stages of fair process can also help to build a sense of connection. While consistently applying fair process takes additional time and structures to ensure clear communication with students, it is essential that institutions communicate all decisions to students so they can meet expectations and perform successfully (Colgan, 2019). Not only does consistent implementation of fair process create avenues toward student success, but it also reflects that the institution values the students’ perspectives and concerns and respects their needs (Brockner, 2006). Sharing broadly how and why institutions make decisions further builds and establishes trust between the student and the institution (Brockner, 2006). Institutions can ask for feedback, but if they fail to explain the decision—which may or may not have incorporated students’ feedback—their students could feel unvalued and unimportant. This, in turn, could negatively impact their success in their program of study and may even impact their decision to remain at the institution (Brockner, 2006). Conversely, when institutions consistently employ all aspects of fair process, students are more likely to see the process as fair even if they are not happy with the outcome (Brockner, 2006). When institutions invest the time to engage with students, provide clear explanations, and create expectation clarity, they establish trusting relationships with their students (Taylor, 2019).

FIGURE 3. Three Stages of Fair Process



Adapted from Kim, W. C., & Mauborgne, R. (1997). Fair process: managing in the knowledge economy. *Harvard Business Review*, 75(4), 65–75.

## FAIR PROCESS: FORMAL ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK

Most schools already invest a lot of time and resources in the engagement phase of fair process through their formal assessment programs. Institutional surveys are one mechanism utilized to solicit students' voices throughout their time at the school. Most surveys in higher education are anonymous and quantitative (Secret et al., 2016). For example, students may be asked to rate their satisfaction with courses, readings, and instructors based on numeric scales. At the IIRP Graduate School, we ask if the syllabus and course description aligned with the course content and about the students' interaction and experience with the instructor (organization of the class, use of class time, fair assessment, encouragement of student engagement, etc). Our quantitative course improvement forms also include qualitative, open-ended questions.

While quantitative data provide a broad overview of the students' perceptions of their experiences, qualitative, anecdotal, and narrative feedback builds a stronger understanding of students' needs and better identifies areas for continual institutional improvement (Wang & Torrisi-Steele, 2015). Colgan (2019) recognizes the importance of crafting questions that allow students to provide more context than quantitative surveys collect. However, even qualitative surveys fail to create opportunities for institutions to ask for clarity about students' needs or concerns, especially at their point of need; engage students in problem solving; or repair relationships and reestablish trust. These are critical components for students to feel valued and to feel they have a voice in the institutional community (Tang, 2018).

Like other institutions, the IIRP surveys our students when they begin their studies (specifically the Monday before they begin their first course), midpoint through their degree program, when they complete their program, and one year after graduation. Unlike other institutions, our surveys are non-anonymous, which provides opportunities for further engagement and feedback. This allows us to

both to ask for clarity about a student's experiences and attempt to repair any feelings of concern or mistrust a student may hold. Student Services reviews these survey results every term and makes continuous improvements to our communication timelines, messages, and student portal experience. Institutions might consider introducing qualitative, non-anonymous surveys as additional tools for students to provide meaningful feedback about their experiences, as well as providing the time and space for Student Services staff to engage students in conversation to understand the student experience. Should institutions opt to move in this direction, they then have the responsibility to consistently respond directly to students when they express concerns.

## FAIR PROCESS: INFORMAL ENGAGEMENT AND FEEDBACK

Our Student Services staff intentionally look for new opportunities for engagement beyond formal assessment, trying to identify and structure other points where feedback is possible. In addition to surveys, our Student Services professionals actively ask for feedback from students during their informal and unstructured conversations, such as when they call or email with questions ranging from a query about upcoming course offerings to their account information. Figure 4 indicates the basic questions we use to do this.

FIGURE 4. Informal Feedback: Process & Questions

### **First, thank the student for their feedback.**

Depending on the issue, process, procedure, or situation, ask:

- What would make the process clearer for you?
- What additional communication would you have found helpful?
- What improvements can you suggest?
- What has been the most difficult/challenging aspect of this experience for you?
- What outcome or result would you like to see?

Office of Student Services. International Institute for Restorative Practices. 2022.

If we receive feedback that is not feasible, we thank the student but provide an explanation as to why we are unable to move forward with their request or suggestion. If we can act, we commit to exploring ways in which we can make changes, based on their feedback. Ideally, we should also round back and tell the student what we have or have not done, but currently we do not have any structure in place to ensure this happens. Closing the feedback loop with the student is an area upon which we can improve. Even so, this process allows us to build stronger relationships with students and better understand their needs, which staff can then share back with the institutional leadership (Taylor, 2019). For example, initially the IIRP offered tuition discounts for all our courses and to all our students. Those tuition discounts varied based on the course and changed each academic year. The inconsistency in our discounting structure across courses and over years created a tremendous amount of confusion for our students, and they told us repeatedly that they found it very difficult to plan their budgets because the tuition for their next courses was unclear. Student Services convened a meeting with the cabinet and other leaders of the institution to share students' confusion and frustration about the tuition structure. Consequently, the IIRP introduced a Transparent Tuition program which guarantees that a student's tuition will not increase while they complete their program of study. This was a direct result of hearing the same feedback in casual conversations with our students as they paid their tuition or asked for clarity on payment.

Engaging students creates learning opportunities for both students and institutions, fosters inclusiveness, strengthens relationships, and enhances student retention (Henderson, 2017; Taylor, 2019). Calvano et al. (2019) challenge institutions to consider engaging students in conversations about class scheduling and formats, which have a significant impact on the students' ability to successfully complete their programs. Because of a verbal suggestion by a student, we recently changed our course schedule to offer one of our more challenging courses during the summer term, when many of our students who

are educators have more time to focus on the more complicated course. Instead of being dismissed as perhaps typical student complaining, informal student feedback on course scheduling may contain important information that impacts their success in a course.

At the IIRP, the Student Services team also engages with students informally to support their growth in restorative practices. When students call the Student Services staff with concerns, our staff engage the student to understand what happened and with whom, as well as what the student needs to move forward. While our staff work with the student to understand their concerns, the conversation does not end there. We support the student as they organize their thoughts and needs in a way that they can then have a direct conversation with the person with whom they have the concern because that is the conversation most needed to address the problem and repair any harm between the student and other person. This type of conversation supports the ethos of restorative practices, supports the teaching and learning within the course, and ultimately supports our institutional mission.

#### FAIR PROCESS: EXPLANATION AND EXPECTATION CLARITY

At the IIRP, our explanations to students, the second stage of fair process, are coupled with clear expectations, the third stage. For example, recently we simplified and clarified our email communication about course registration deadlines, and they now include specific action steps and explicit timelines. We added a message box on the home page of the student portal, where we reiterate the registration deadlines. However, there are still times that students miss the registration period. When they call us, we provide an explanation that the registration deadline is set to allow students to be best prepared for their courses and that it is with the student's best interests in mind that we do not accept registrations once the final deadline date has passed. We explain that we know from the experience of previous students that the established registration timeline allows students enough time to purchase their books, review the

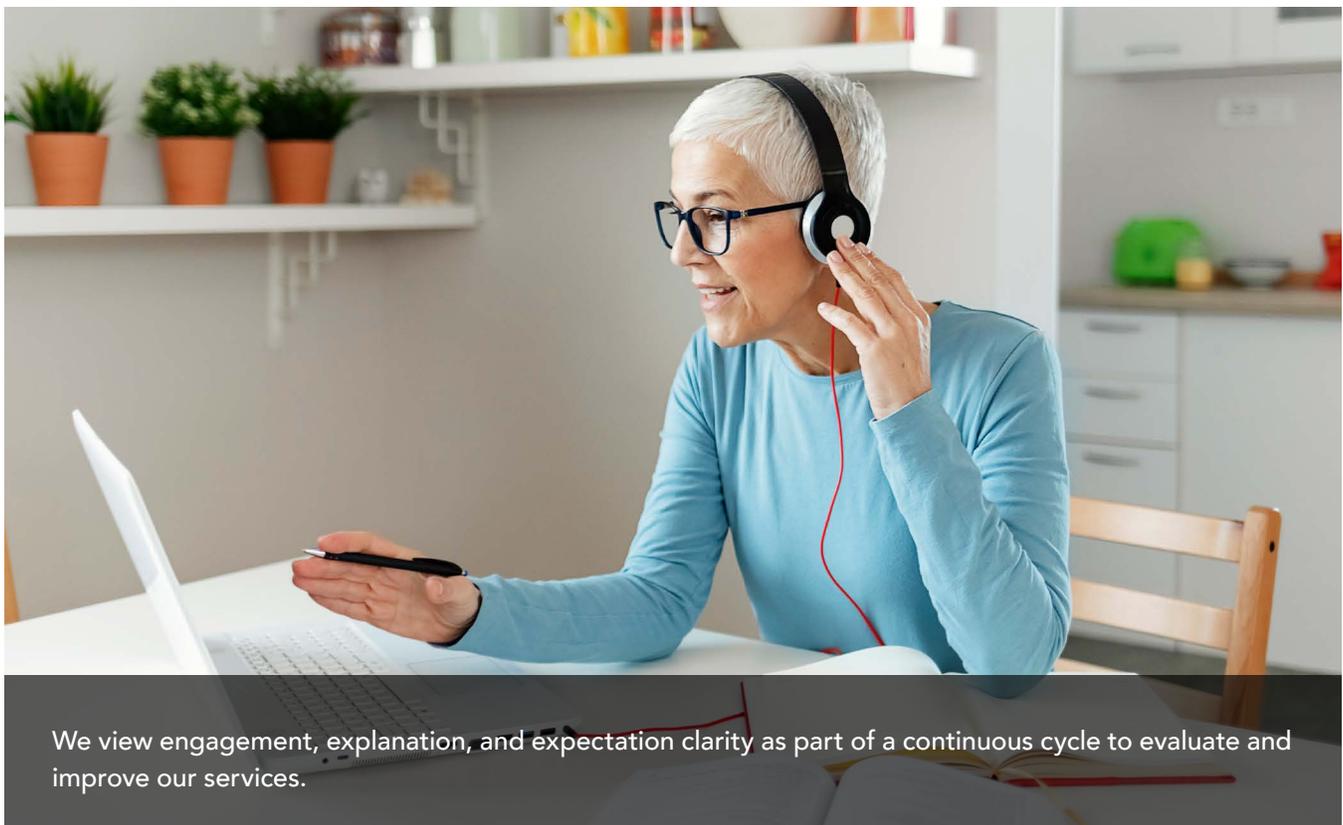
course schedule, and plan for the upcoming work. We found that when we've made exceptions in the past, students are ill-prepared at best and often end up withdrawing from the course, which results in dissatisfaction and financial implications. The full range of fair process is evident in this response. The final decision was based on engagement with our students about the need for a deadline, followed by an explanation of our decision, which makes clear what student expectations should be. But our use of fair process doesn't end there. We try to be as transparent as possible by sharing the steps we took to provide the information to students, and we ask for feedback about how we might improve our communication in the future. Sharing the rationale behind decisions builds trust and strengthens our relationships with each other. We view engagement, explanation, and expectation clarity as part of a continuous cycle to evaluate and improve our services.

Despite engaging, explaining, and clearly outlining expectations, students may not always agree with decisions, or think that decisions are unfair. Fair

process is not about the decisions being fair; it is about the process being fair (Brockner, 2006). While not all decisions are open for discussion (e.g., a licensing agency has changed acceptable courses to meet requirements), any decision impacting the student should be open for explanation. Consistently utilizing all three Es of fair process ensures the process is fair, even though the decision may not meet all students' expectations and preferences (Brockner, 2006).

### FAIR PROCESS: BUILDING COMMUNITY BEYOND THE CLASSROOM

Online learning presents specific challenges when engaging students and building a sense of connection with the institution. As an institution dedicated to teaching and practicing building community, this priority underlies everything we do at the IIRP, including working with students. Students recognize the importance of relationships and a sense of community within the classroom (Calvano et al., 2019). However, while online



learners may not express a desire for informal opportunities to interact with one another, paradoxically they report a lack of both connection with students outside of class and a sense of belonging within their institution (Bolliger et al., 2019; Kretovics, 2015; Pascale, 2018).

Pascale (2018) recognizes the importance of, but the challenge in, creating these spaces for students to engage with one another, with the institution, and with faculty members outside of the online classroom. While challenging, this is not impossible. One new initiative we are considering is creating a virtual meeting space where our current students and alumni can communicate and collaborate. This engagement provides opportunities for institutions to build relationships with students, and the interactive spaces can be places where students communicate and problem-solve, practice what they learn in class, and exchange ideas and resources (Kretovics, 2015). While institutions may participate in some online engagement spaces, they should also provide opportunities for students to facilitate other

spaces to encourage authentic and unstructured discussions (Kretovics, 2015). These informal spaces support student engagement, strengthen relationships among students, and expand their sense of community within the institution (Calvano et al., 2019). They also foster collaboration, support various learning styles, and invite student creativity beyond the classroom (Henderson, 2017; Secret et al., 2016).

A recent experience indicates that students respond well to the opportunity to create a virtual experience beyond the classroom. In 2020, COVID-19 impacted our school's ability to offer the graduating class an in-person commencement. A mandatory state shutdown meant that we had to suspend the usual in-person ceremony, so we engaged students in conversation about how they would like to celebrate their accomplishments. Our Student Services staff kept students informed as they neared their program completion and scheduled live Zoom meetings to hear their ideas. Staff began those meetings by asking students what they wanted from their graduation event and what was important for them. The students discussed their feelings, shared their ideas, and collaborated with one another to create a virtual celebration for the graduating class. Several students took the lead in engaging the rest of the class and created a slideshow presentation for the event, highlighting each student and information that students wished to share about themselves. The institution also created an online platform where students, faculty, and administration could write personalized notes to each student, and the graduates received the notes after the virtual celebration. Not only did the graduates have a say in how they wished to celebrate their accomplishments, but the school supported them in building capacity to engage one another and facilitate their own celebration. This expanded engagement between the students and the institution, as well as strengthened their relationships with one another beyond the structure and confines of the classroom.

Institutions who proactively ask students about their interests and their needs will have the



The students discussed their feelings, shared their ideas, and collaborated with one another to create a virtual celebration for the graduating class.

opportunity to find new and creative ways to meet the demands of this demographic of students while, at the same time, strengthening their feelings of belonging within the institution. Fair process can help determine student interest in informal, social spaces as well as establish shared expectations and clear boundaries within the spaces. If constructing your own proprietary platform is not an option, the internet is rich with engagement platforms, blogs, and social media that institutions might consider utilizing to build online spaces for students to interact (Kretovics, 2015).

### FAIR PROCESS: ALUMNI ENGAGEMENT

As a young school, our alumni is a small yet diverse body and we are still learning how to support this part of our community. For example, attempts to create engagement opportunities originally consisted of two separate social media platforms, one for students and one for alumni. As we considered the potential benefit of connecting students with our alumni, we engaged the alumni group in the discussion of combining the two platforms, to which the alumni enthusiastically agreed. Our Student Services staff continued to pursue this idea, and with faculty support, we found a group of alumni who expressed interest in facilitating a platform and group for current students to congregate. However, student response was

weak, so even with alumni interest, we opted not to invest resources into something we were not certain our students wanted. Recently, because of COVID, the IIRP offered virtual events for alumni hosted by faculty and staff on a variety of topics such as writing and publishing, utilizing restorative practices outside of the work environment, and political unrest. The events were well received. We will continue to seek opportunities to engage with our alumni to determine the types and frequency of experiences they prefer and how we can provide them. Proactive circles or listening circles, for example, are a restorative practice familiar to all our alumni, as they are commonly used in all our classes. They provide space to meet, share ideas, learn from one another, problem solve, and discuss challenges. To encourage continued involvement after graduation, we invite alumni to facilitate and participate in these circles whenever possible and actively seek out opportunities and events to include them. Faculty connections are also important to alumni. Faculty build relationships with their students—relationships that both groups value—and they may be happy to continue after students graduate. Listening circles and building on faculty-student relationships are two areas of engagement that we will continue to explore as a basis for supporting community with our alumni and which other institutions might also find useful.

# CHALLENGES OF IMPLEMENTING FAIR PROCESS

While fair process and feedback support building effective student services, challenges remain. Our three main challenges are time, feedback gaps, and identifying how our students want to engage. Just as in other institutions, one common gap in the engagement cycle occurs when students fail to respond to institutional surveys or inquiries from Student Services and we don't receive their feedback. This can include both students who successfully complete their coursework and those who either discontinue their studies or formally withdraw (Richardson, 2005). This should raise concern about what institutions are not learning

accurate understanding of their issues. After that conversation, we follow up with the student a second time to ensure their concern has been addressed.

Institutions should not only assess the needs and interests of the students who enroll, whether in-person or virtually, but also identify and understand why learners chose not to study at their institution (Patton, 2015). Not doing so overlooks potentially useful information about any number of factors that may influence a student's decision to enroll (e.g., curriculum; school reputation; interactions with staff and faculty). From the work of our Student Services



How can institutions encourage students to offer feedback when a concern arises for them, rather than waiting for and hoping that a scheduled survey will record their issues?

about students' needs. For those students who continue to study but decline to respond to surveys, Richardson (2005) suggests that institutions review the questions they are asking to ensure they are clear and that the feedback channels utilized promote student responses. But for some students who do not respond, the concern is that they may be drifting away and there has been no opportunity or means to identify a problem outside of scheduled formal surveys. How can institutions encourage students to offer feedback when a concern arises for them, rather than waiting for and hoping that a scheduled survey will record their issues? How can institutions build stronger relationships with students so that students are comfortable initiating feedback at their points of need, rather than waiting for us to ask? When students do raise concerns in a formal survey, we follow up and try to speak with them directly to ensure we have a thorough and

staff, we know that when engaging with students considering our institution and providing additional information and clarification, insight for both prospective students and staff occurs. A student may realize that our program is not for them, and we may see opportunities to refine our communication materials if these materials have contributed to any misunderstanding about the program.

Lack of institutional data on students who do not enroll also has the potential to negatively affect the relationships within an institution, specifically between student services and those administrators tasked with defining and operationalizing institutional practices. Student services professionals are often the first, and main, point of contact for students and, subsequently, have a strong understanding of student need. If student services staff perceive that their feedback

is not valuable or included, this can lead to feelings of distrust among the staff who communicate directly with students and those who have the authority to make changes, or in student affairs professionals feeling they are viewed as “servants, not as partners” (Henderson, 2017, p. 154). Therefore, collaboration among staff, faculty, and administration is critical to promote students’ sense of community with the institution (Calvano et al., 2019; Gillett-Karam, 2016; Henderson, 2017). Lack of collaboration and strong internal relationships at all levels of an institution, including administrators and student services, can resonate throughout the organization, including at the student level. This may result in students feeling disconnected from, or lacking trust in, their institution (Henderson, 2017).

Time is one of the major impediments to engaging with students and sharing decisions that impact them, and it is also essential to completing the second and third stages of fair process: explanation and engagement. Providing clear explanations may take

additional staff time and effort, but these conversations are crucial to establish expectation clarity. When staff have successfully completed the engagement and explanation phases, expectation clarity means that students are more likely to understand what will happen and their role in the outcome, whether it’s tuition costs and payments, course registration, or additional program options like specializations or the thesis option. This, in turn, creates trusting relationships among students and the institution, and students feel important and valued (Gillett-Karam, 2016). By clearly explaining expectations, student affairs professionals not only help students understand and meet institutional expectations but also build competencies with their students to create similar experiences with others in their own lives and work environments (Gillett-Karam, 2016). These conversations also build relationships and establish trust with the institution (Cornell et al., 2019).

We are still uncertain about whether our students want to engage with one another outside of the



Time is one of the major impediments to engaging with students....

classroom and, if so, how. Our attempts to date haven't achieved the results we'd hoped for. Despite alumni enthusiasm for a shared platform, response from students was low. Since then, we also built an online platform within our learning management system for current students to connect with each other outside of their classes. Originally, the discussions in this platform were driven by faculty, but as students failed to engage, faculty posted less frequently and the effort lost momentum. Upon reflection we recognized that we'd only announced the new platform once to students enrolled at that time, and we failed to continue to share the opportunity or intent in an ongoing way. Even after additional communication, we see little activity on the platform. Is this because students are experiencing community elsewhere? Is it because the vehicle we created for their community is not the right one for them?

Research indicates that graduate students show an interest in discussions about careers and career services (Robertson, 2020), but also that online engagement opportunities should be fun and engaging and offered through various mechanisms like podcasts, videos, and resource sharing (Secret et al., 2016). These are possibilities for us to explore

with our students. Additional suggestions include offering opportunities in which students practice what they learn, like internships, and projects where faculty and students work together (Henderson, 2017; Pascale, 2018). But we know that to move forward, we need to continue to engage with our students to determine if support for online community outside of their classes is a service they want. We will look at a variety of tools such as focus groups, a learning circle, on-line polls or surveys to engage our students so that we can find the answers we need. Asking a broad question about whether a student wishes to participate in an online community-building experience may receive a negative response, but a specific question about their postgraduation aspirations could, for example, lead to the development of a resource-sharing site shared by alumni who offer their experiences about how they used their new degrees, either to further existing professional situations or to secure a new career. Developing these types of experiences may promote student success, while at the same time strengthening the sense of community among students, alumni, and their institutions in a variety of combinations (Colgan, 2019). Perhaps we will discover that the focus of the online community we seek to set up must be decided by the students.

# SUMMARY

Gillett-Karam (2016) recognizes the imperative for institutions to continuously improve the support services offered to students as those students' needs evolve and change. This is especially true for graduate students, who have traditionally been underserved, and complicated by the online environment, where most student services cannot be delivered in person. The IIRP Graduate School is a young and small institution, but because we serve only online graduate students, we have been able to focus on learning how to support this segment of the population in higher education. As we grow, our capacity to sustain this model will be challenged, but because of our overall goal of building relationships and community, we are committed to identifying ways to continue to do so. Not everything we currently do in our Student Services department may be easily replicated at other places; they may not seem possible at larger,

older institutions where there are more students and much has been invested in current student services. However, graduate student populations at most campuses are a small percentage of the larger student population and, as such, could provide opportunities to develop new and appropriate support services, while undergraduate students continue to receive traditional support. Based on our experience, student affairs professionals should consider the use of fair process and the feedback it supports to create and continuously assess their student services. Staff can use it for many aspects of a student's experience—from admissions through alumni status. The use of fair process and feedback not only help to identify and build student services, but when student affairs professionals work with graduate students, they can establish strong, lasting relationships, trust, and an enhanced sense of community with the institution.

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