

PROMOTING THRIVING, EMBEDDEDNESS, & ENGAGEMENT AT STETSON

In response to findings from the 2017-2018 study of first-year students' perceptions and experiences, and as part of my Provost Faculty Fellow role, I have been charged with offering recommendations for engagement initiatives during and beyond students' first-year at Stetson, as well as proposing ways to institutionalize practices that promote thriving and embeddedness. To these ends, I present the enclosed discussion.

I have organized this document into four sections. First, I describe my approach and preparation for this work and, in Section II, I review background details about the outcomes of interest, which includes a summary of key definitions, as well as applicable theory for identifying relevant processes and practices. In Section III, these discussions then converge on key insights through which we can consider proposed practices and related work in the future. In Section IV, I introduce my thoughts on institutionalizing practices that promote thriving and embeddedness. Subsequently, through conversation, I propose practices aligned with the desired outcomes.

I. APPROACH

To meet the above referenced objectives, I utilized a five-step approach, in which the first step was to review the essence of our University's mission, vision, and the explicit values stated therein. It is my view that, in conjunction with empirical findings and theory, the core tenets of our institution should inform our consideration of practices that promote thriving, embeddedness, and engagement. Moreover, these should guide the behavior of members of the Stetson community and should send signals about the types of behaviors that threaten our ability to successfully fulfill the core purpose of our University and, presumably, our ability to meet the thriving, embeddedness, and engagement needs of all (e.g., students, faculty). For reference, I include our guiding tenets below, which I retrieved from our University website.¹ In later sections of the report, I refer back to key aspects of our vision, mission, and values.

Abridged Vision

"...Today, the university prepares students for existing and new challenges with broad knowledge and the unflagging fortitude necessary to serve future generations with compassion, significance, and respect. Students come to Stetson to gather the courage to declare, "I will build a better world!""

Mission and Core Values

"Our mission at Stetson University is to provide an excellent education in a creative community where learning and values meet, and to foster in students the qualities of mind and heart that will prepare them to reach their full potential as informed citizens of local communities and the world.

At Stetson, the art of teaching is practiced through programs solidly grounded in a tradition of liberal learning that stimulates critical thinking, imaginative inquiry, creative expression, and lively intellectual debate. The art of learning is enhanced through small,

¹ <https://www.stetson.edu/other/about/>

interactive classes; close student-faculty alliances; and collaborative approaches that provide the foundation for rewarding careers and advanced study in selective graduate and professional programs. We embrace diverse methodologies to foster effective communication; information and technological literacy; and aesthetic appreciation. We encourage the development of informed convictions; independent judgment; and lifelong commitments to learning that are characteristic features of the enlightened citizen. In bringing together learning and values, the university encourages all of its members to demonstrate personal integrity; to develop an appreciation for the spiritual dimension of life; to embrace leadership in an increasingly complex, interdependent, and technological world; and to commit to active forms of social responsibility.

Stetson is dedicated to the development of the whole person: A person committed to engaging and building life-long connections with the larger world through personal growth, intellectual development, and global citizenship. To that end, the university fosters policies, practices, and modes of inquiry to support and explore these values areas.”

In the second step of my approach, I revisited key internal documents including the Quantitative Results & Discussion report of the 2017-2018 retention study, the results of the 2017 Student Satisfaction Inventory, and the Friday Group Report (FGR). The purpose for reviewing each document varied. The review of the retention study results and the SSI report enabled me to reflect on student perceptions and experiences and, in turn, be more apt to identify thriving and embeddedness practices that are meaningful and may address the needs of our students as conveyed in these reports. My review of the FGR enabled me to more deeply consider the perspectives of other voices in the community and to identify connections between those insights and proposed thriving and embeddedness practices. For example, among other points beyond the scope of this discussion, the FGR report highlights the importance of intense faculty-student relationships, advising improvements, and student and faculty development.

In addition to reviewing the guiding tenets of our University and internal reports, I engaged in an in-depth review of thriving, embeddedness, and related constructs. In Section II, I summarize the concepts and relevant theory. I also briefly discuss empirical findings.

Beyond the above referenced literature, I also tried to gain a deeper understanding of the generational differences that likely impact the effectiveness of thriving, embeddedness, and engagement practices. To this end, I reviewed research on how students born since 1995 differ psychologically from previous generations. Given stark differences, it is not surprising that best practices that improved student outcomes in times past have not had the same effects in recent years. Work by leading social psychologists (e.g., Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018; Twenge, 2017), in detail, the behavior, values, and mental state of *iGens* and how members of this generational cohort differ from those even slightly older in age. In Section III, I summarize some of the key findings and discuss implications for promoting thriving and embeddedness at Stetson.

For the last preparation task, I explored practices and programs at other universities. Primarily, I reviewed practices employed by the Winners of the Lee Noel & Randi Levitz Retention

Excellence Awards². I integrate some ideas in my discussion of practices that may promote thriving and embeddedness at Stetson. However, given differences between Stetson and many of the award recipients, along with my colleagues' work and expertise in higher education and student success, I did not delve as deeply into this area, compared to the other tasks discussed above.

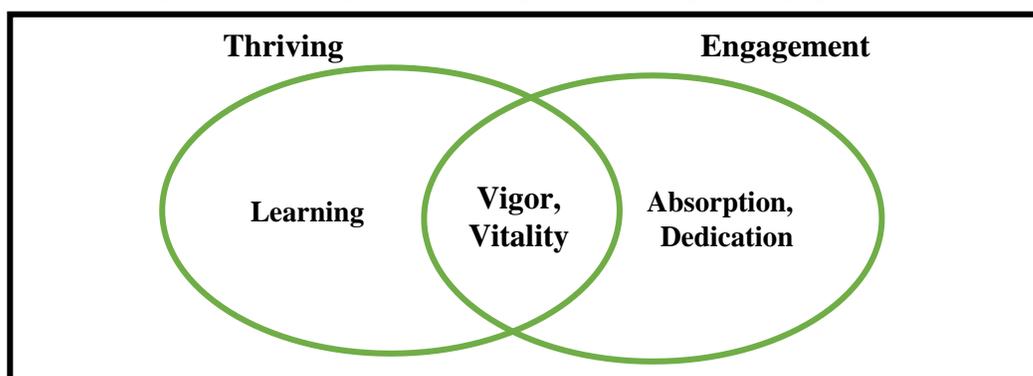
Finally, I will emphasize that my approach to this work, overall, is grounded in my knowledge of learning and development, leadership, and other behavioral topics relevant for thriving and embeddedness. I do not attempt to untangle other issues that could impact thriving (e.g., academic ability), which have been raised by various groups on campus. Rather, I have approached this work from the key assumption that it is possible and desirable to promote the thriving and embeddedness of all, and I leverage theory and empirical findings to identify practices toward these ends.

II. OUTCOMES OF INTEREST

Thriving & Engagement

Thriving and engagement are distinct constructs with significant conceptual overlap (see Figure 1)—both involve an individual's connection to the activities in which one is involved. For clarification and in an effort to identify meaningful practices for our consideration, I discuss the similarities and differences of these constructs, as well as related theory, antecedents, and outcomes.

Figure 1: Conceptual Overlap of Thriving & Engagement



(Adapted from Spreitzer et al., 2010)

Engagement has been viewed as a sense of fulfillment, a positive affective-motivational state which is manifested in three dimensions: 1) vigor (i.e., energy, resilience, persistence in the face of difficulties, investment of effort in one's activities), 2) dedication (i.e., involvement in one's activities that is accompanied by feelings of significance, pride, and inspiration), and 3) absorption (i.e., fully engrossed in activities such that the individual has difficulty detaching oneself from the work) (Bakker, Demerouti, & Euwema, 2005; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004; G. M. Spreitzer, Lam, & Fritz, 2010).

² https://www.ruffalonl.com/wp-content/uploads/pdf/RNL_2018_REA_Compendium-1.pdf

Related research has conceptualized engagement as the investment of an individual's complete self into a role (Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010). The focus of this motivational construct is on the allocation of personal resources, namely how intensely and persistently those resources are applied. Engagement theory suggests that the motivational effects are attained when individuals maintain cognitive, emotional, and physical engagement simultaneously rather than in a fragmented manner. Cognitive engagement refers to the investment of cognitive energy that promotes behavior that is more vigilant, attentive, and focused. Emotional engagement helps individuals meet emotional demands of a job and influences performance by increasing connections to others in pursuit of goals. While, physical engagement facilitates behaviors that are valued at increased levels of effort over extended periods of time (e.g., exerting full effort, working with intensity) (Kahn, 1990; Rich et al., 2010).

Thriving is also a state, one in which individuals experience *both* a sense of vitality and learning (Porath, Spreitzer, Gibson, & Garnett, 2012). Thus, to thrive, individuals must be able to sense that they are acquiring new knowledge and skills and have energy, a sense of spirit, and look forward to each new day. Scholars contend thriving is a socially embedded process (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005) and have demonstrated that thriving requires a joint experience of learning and vitality. To this point, when individuals thrive, they experience both the affective and cognitive dimensions of the psychological experience of personal growth (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

From the above discussion, both thriving and engagement are states that involve approaching one's activities with positive energy (i.e., vitality and vigor). However, thriving has a unique dimension that is particularly relevant for our context; it encompasses learning and a focus on forward progress and development. To this point, it is possible for an individual to be engaged and not thriving, as can be gathered from some of the qualitative comments reported in the 2017-2018 retention study. For example, one student stated, "I wanted to jump into so many things like orgs and Greek life on top of my school work. I found there are only so many hours in a day and juggling is not manageable as a first-year student." This statement suggests the student was dedicated and absorbed in his or her activities (i.e., engaged) in such a way that it detracted from learning. As such, it becomes important to help students balance present-state involvement (engagement) with improvement-focused involvement (thriving).

Empirical research and two theoretical frameworks, the first of which is self-determination theory, SDT (Gagne & Deci, 2005), provide insight on how to promote thriving. SDT assumes that individuals have an inherent desire to grow, develop, and obtain an integrated sense of self, and that individuals can maintain and regulate their energy when the psychological needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy are met. When these psychological needs are met and when individuals are intrinsically motivated (motivated by enjoyment and interest rather than instrumental reasons), thriving increases. In Table 1, I elaborate on these psychological needs and summarize some of the antecedents that are related to each (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014).

Table 1: Descriptions of Psychological Needs that Support Thriving

Psychological Need	Description	Related Antecedents
Relatedness	Feeling connected to others and having a sense of belongingness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discretion (e.g., decision making) • Climate of trust and respect
Competence	A sense of self-efficacy in dealing with the environment and making effective use of surrounding resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information sharing & access to resources • Discretion (e.g., decision making) • Climate of trust and respect • Access to developmental feedback
Autonomy	The sense that one's behavior emanates and is endorsed by oneself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information sharing & access to resources • Discretion (e.g., decision making)

Further, there is robust empirical support for the notion that leaders play a critical role in ensuring the above referenced needs are met. Leaders have been defined as “anyone who takes responsibility for finding the potential in people and processes and has the courage to develop that potential” (Brown, 2018). For our context, this means the faculty and staff whom interact with and support students play a key role in the extent to which students may experience thriving.

Leaders can support thriving when they foster a learning orientation (e.g., seek out challenges, the belief that ability is malleable), psychological safety, and meaningfulness. Psychological safety is the shared belief that an environment is safe for interpersonal risk taking behaviors, such as asking for help, asking questions, and expressing dissenting views, among others (Edmondson, 1999). Meaningfulness is experienced when one's pursuits contribute to a sense of significance, deepens the understanding of the self and facilitates personal growth, and provides opportunities to have an impact on others (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010; Steger & Dik, 2009).

Some of the specific leadership approaches that have been shown to foster thriving include transformational, servant, and authentic leadership styles. Transformational leadership encompasses emotions, values, ethics, standards, long-term goals, and processes that change and transform people. Servant leaders are attentive to the needs and concerns of others, empathize with them, and nurture them (Northouse, 2016). Although the literature lacks a succinct definition of authentic leadership, much can be gleaned from the leadership characteristics summarized in Table 2.

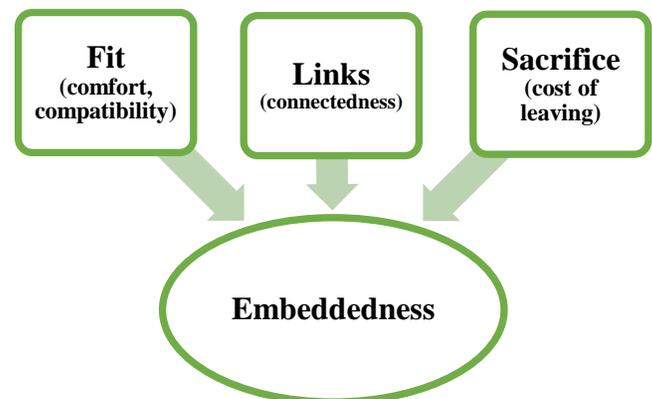
Table 2: Sample Leadership Characteristics by Theory

Authentic Leadership	Transformational Leadership	Servant Leadership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational • Genuine • Transparent • High ethics • Honest • Self-aware • Self-disciplined • Accountable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational • High ethics • Visionary • Self-aware • Integrity • Supportive • Collaborative • Encourages learning • Accountable 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational • Serves others • Inspires others • Honest • Self-aware • Supportive • Collaborative • Visionary • Balanced • Encourages learning • Accountable

Other theories also provide insight about thriving, and scholars have suggested a relationship between thriving and sensemaking processes. Sensemaking is triggered by cues (events, situations, or issues) for which the meaning is ambiguous or outcomes uncertain. It is comprised of processes (e.g., narrative and writing) that help individuals understand and explain the world around them. Scholars contend that sensemaking is a matter of identity and can help individuals create awareness, anticipate problems, and reduce ambiguity (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005; Weick, 1993). Processes that enhance sensemaking are important for us to consider, as data provided by students suggests that their much of their first year is ambiguous with uncertain outcomes.

Embeddedness

Embeddedness was also found to be an important indicator for retention in the 2017-2018 retention study. Drawing from the management literature, embeddedness has been defined as the combined forces that keep a person from leaving his or her job (Yao, Mitchell, Burton, & Sablynski, 2004). As shown in Figure 2, embeddedness is represented by three facets: links (formal or informal connections between a person and institutions, locations, or other people), fit (compatibility or comfort with work and nonwork environments) and sacrifice (cost of material or psychological benefits one may forfeit by leaving one's job or community) (Crossley, Bennett, Jex, & Burnfield, 2007).

Figure 2: Conceptual View of Embeddedness

Because embeddedness is a formative casual indicator construct, we know more about the outcomes of embeddedness than its antecedents, especially in our context. Recall that when our students lacked embeddedness, they were less satisfied overall, had higher intentions to leave, and lower retention than those with high embeddedness. Moreover, organizational research has demonstrated that low embeddedness is contagious (Felps et al., 2009).

While I believe there are likely opportunities to improve fit (e.g., during recruitment/admission processes), the key facet for which I will focus when considering proposed practices is the links (connectedness) dimension. Connectedness reinforces efforts aimed at thriving (e.g., belongingness needs) and is fundamentally aligned with what we aim to deliver as a University (e.g., life-long connections, close alliances).

Before I proceed with a discussion on institutionalizing practices that promote thriving and connectedness, I would like to discuss thriving and connectedness in relation to research on generational differences and our University's vision and mission, as well as general takeaways from the discussions thus far.

III. INSIGHTS TO INFORM PROPOSED PRACTICES

iGen: Implications for Thriving, Connectedness, Satisfaction, & Prosocial Intentions

Scholars contend that the first of the iGen cohort entered college around 2012 or 2013 and, compared to previous generations, iGens bring unique perspectives, experiences, and characteristics to college campuses. Some of these pose direct links to our vision and mission. While, anecdotally, we all know there are differences, I think with an enhanced understanding of our customers' generational differences, we will be in a better position to promote their thriving and connectedness. For example, per our vision, we strive to “prepare students for challenges”...“with unflagging fortitude”...and “to gather courage”. Broadly speaking, there is an inherent tension between the characteristics of the iGen population and the outcomes we strive to attain. Research has shown that iGens have grown up in a culture of safetyism in which they have less experience coping with challenges (Lukianoff & Haidt, 2018), are less likely to speak up in educational settings (out of fear for saying the wrong thing), and are less confident upon entering college compared to Millennials (Twenge, 2017). Consequently, it takes more reassurance and trust to get them to participate in learning processes.

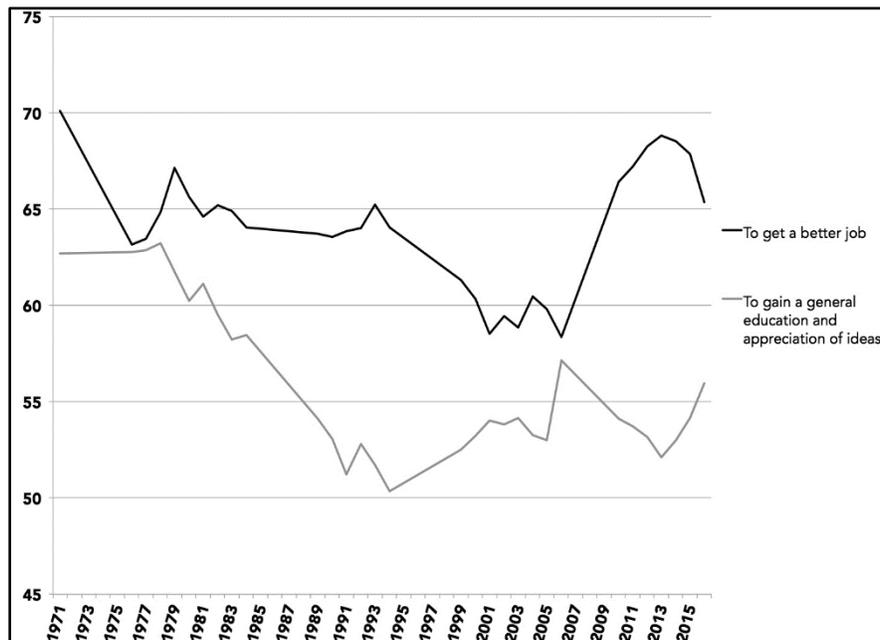
Further, recall that, according to self-determination theory and prior research (Spreitzer & Porath, 2014), when individuals are intrinsically motivated (i.e, doing something for enjoyment and interest rather than instrumental outcomes), thriving increases. Again, when we look at the data, we can see an inherent tension between this notion and the baseline perspective of iGen students. As shown in Figure 3, intrinsic motivation for school declined significantly in 2012.

Figure 3: Monitoring the Future- 12th Graders' Intrinsic Motivation for Going to School (1976-2015)



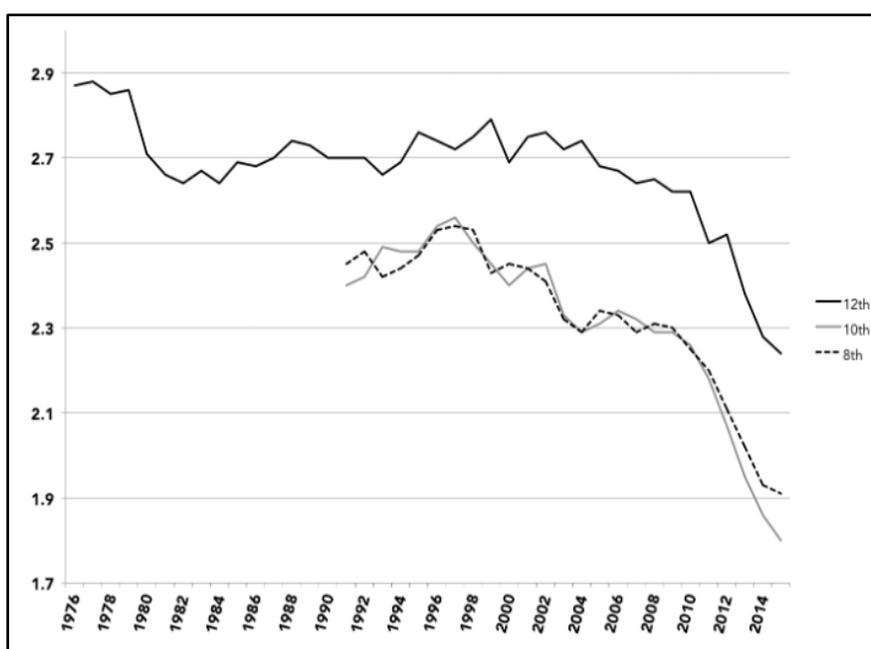
Likewise, scholars contend that learning has been less important to college freshman in recent years; they are less focused on acquiring the skills and ideas that come with general education. As shown in Figure 4, extrinsic outcomes, a focus on their future career/job, are of higher importance. Given these findings, what are the implications of this for an institution that reinforces the value of diverse ideas, immerses freshman in general education, and whose mission is grounded in liberal learning?

Figure 4: American Freshman Survey- Reasons for Going to College (1971-2015)



Beyond implications for thriving, there are other findings from generational research that we should be mindful of as we consider ways to enhance the connectedness of students and their overall satisfaction at Stetson. First, as shown in Figure 5 below, iGens are less likely to experience the autonomy that comes with being out of the house without their parents. The decline shown holds across racial demographics, working- vs. middle-class, and cannot be linked to the recession (i.e., even when the economy rebounded, the decline continued). They also have spent less time hanging out with friends, compared to previous generations (Twenge, 2017). Consequently, when they come to college, they have significantly less experience navigating the dynamics of building connections within a community.

**Figure 5: Monitoring the Future-
Times per Week 8th, 10th, & 12th Graders
Go Out Without Their Parents (1976-2015)**



Moreover, consistent with data presented by Leigh Baker at various forums on campus, compared to prior generational cohorts, iGens have a higher tendency to experience mental health issues, as well as feel left out and lonely (Twenge, 2017). Loneliness manifests itself in a sense of exhaustion and can cause individuals to feel lethargic (Seppala & King, 2017). There is a story recounted in *Dare to Lead* (Brown, 2018), a leadership development text I use in my EMBA courses, that has resonated with me given the retention and engagement work in which I have engaged. The story discusses an impromptu conversation an Air Force leader had with her airmen when she realized their feelings of burnout and exhaustion were actually the manifestation of loneliness. Some of the more powerful quotes she shared, which I think should prompt reflection for us are as follows:

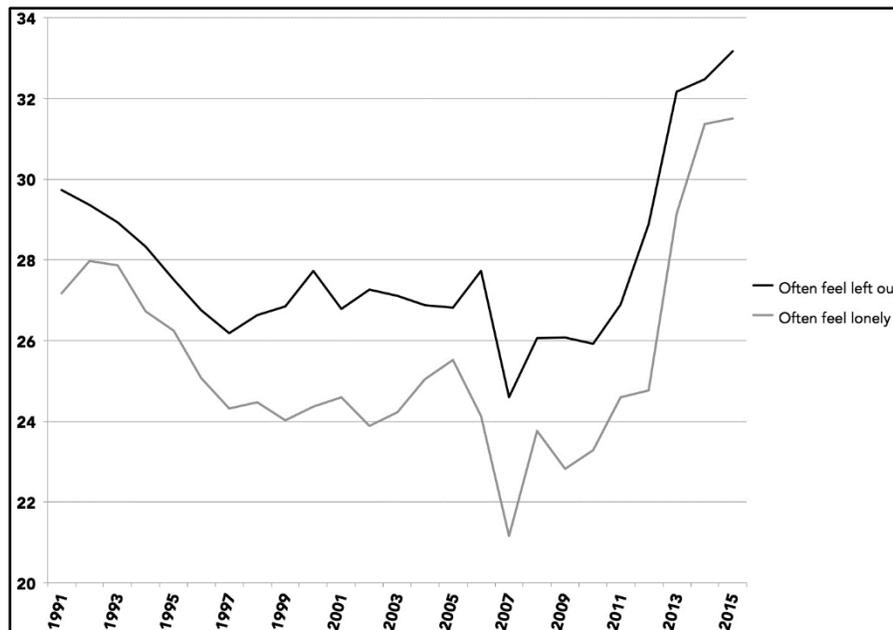
“We spend so much time talking with them about available resources, but I’m not sure enough of us are talking about the fact that, in the end, a lot of people are just lonely. They’re not connecting, and they’re not reaching out” (Brown, 2018, p. 61).

“...if I am comfortable enough to use the right language and say “Are you lonely?” I may be able to create a connection that gives someone hope. It’s possible that by using the right language I’ll create a connection where maybe, just maybe, they’ll come talk to me” (Brown, 2018, p. 62)

“...*disconnected* is a sterile word. It’s a safe word. It’s not a word that conveys the true depth of shared human experience like loneliness....The words we use matter. But words like *loneliness*, *empathy*, and *compassion*, are words not often discussed in our leadership training” (Brown, 2018, p. 64)

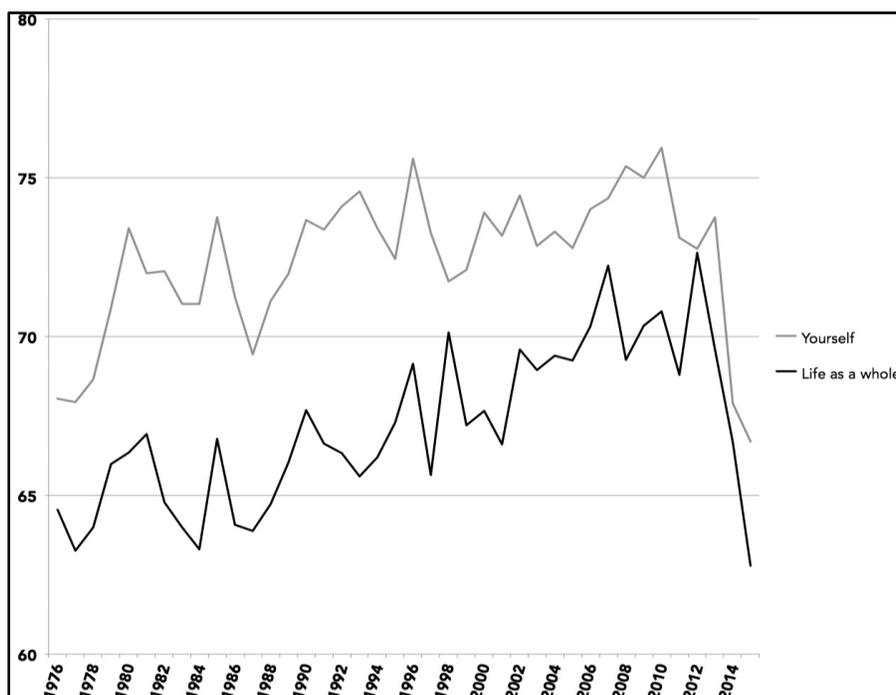
The latter quote really caught my attention—compassion is encompassed in our vision, empathy is a common thread throughout the leadership behaviors linked to thriving and belongingness, and loneliness is likely a real issue for our first-year students (see Figure 6).

Figure 6: Monitoring the Future -Percentage of 8th, 10th, & 12th Graders Who Mostly Agree with ... (1991-2015)



Perhaps related to a sense of loneliness, iGens have also reported less overall satisfaction with life and themselves (see Figure 7). I note this finding given its connection to some of our 2017-2018 retention study findings. Specifically, as life satisfaction decreased so did thriving, embeddedness, and retention.

Figure 7: Monitoring the Future - Percentage of 12th Graders Who Are Satisfied with Their Lives as a Whole & Themselves (1976-2015)



At this point, I will note that I do not think we should change our liberal learning focus (perhaps how we frame some of their first-year course experiences), nor do I think we should “hand-hold” students or have a “kids these days” mindset. I draw attention to these findings because one of most basic concepts of effective communication, teaching, collaboration, leading, supporting others, etc. is to understand from where others come. These are not opinions or anecdotes; these are empirical findings based on several robust and representative data sets—Monitoring the Future, The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System administered by the Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, The American Freshman Survey administered by the Higher Education Research Institute, and the General Social Survey. While select individuals around campus may have knowledge of these topics, I suspect many do not. If we all own the responsibility for students’ thriving, connectedness, and retention, we should all understand our customers. Experts contend that the last of the iGen cohort was likely born around 2012, thus these issues can continue to impact our students’ success and our success as an institution for several years.

The last iGen finding I will share relates to their desire to help others and to make a contribution to society, which is more important to iGens entering college compared to Millennials and previous generations (Twenge, 2017). This aligns with comments we heard in our focus groups, in which participants discussed their appreciation for service learning projects, as well as some of the Spring Engagement Cohort comments (e.g., wanting to join the cohort to help others).

That said, experiences that leverage this characteristic of iGens may be useful for meeting their needs and building community.

Other Insights & Takeaways

From the preceding discussions, a few key themes come to mind. First, a focus on character development should be as important as academic excellence. In fact, some experts point to research that suggests academic excellence is a poor predictor of career excellence and job performance after the first year out of college (Grant, 2018). We promote “development of the whole person” and many of the words embedded in our vision and mission are character dimensions (e.g., integrity, compassion, courage). Though we may be missing opportunities to formally integrate this in our first-year experiences in a consistent way. We have mechanisms in place to assess academic performance. Where are opportunities to help first-year students track their development (e.g., character) more broadly? Building character strengths can help combat some of the challenging aspects of the iGens’ upbringing and can provide growth indicators beyond assignment grades and GPA. To this point, we likely are not being as intentional and explicit as we should be in how we think about and track development in their first year. Further, if integrating tasks/experiences with other aspects of oneself is fundamental to thriving, then formalized reflection and sensemaking processes (e.g., e-portfolios, conversational group reflections) can help achieve these ends. To institutionalize such, it has to be tied to common experiences (e.g., advising) to which all students are exposed.

The next observation is that relationships and key individuals (“leaders”) are at the core of thriving and connectedness. Table 3 summarizes the dimensions of meaningful connections, which are all relationship-based. This suggests that practices aimed at developing relational skills should be embedded throughout our organization and accountability and measurement systems should be aligned accordingly. Recall that leaders play a key role in shaping the contextual enablers of thriving and connectedness. While individual thriving and connectedness practices can be proposed and implemented, a systemic approach for promoting these outcomes would be more effective. In the following section, I highlight some sample thoughts toward this end and will elaborate through conversation.

Table 3: Dimensions of Meaningful Connections

Dimension	Description
Individual and career development	Relationships that offer individuals access to opportunities to develop and advance
Task accomplishment	Relationships that enable individuals to perform tasks effectively
Sensemaking	Relationships that help people make sense of events, experiences, and contexts
Provision of meaning (purpose)	Relationships that enable people to feel validated and valued, connected to larger purposes, & reinforced in meaningful identity
Personal support	Relationships that provide help with potential and real sources of stress and anxiety

(Adapted from Kahn, 2007)

IV. INSTITUTIONALIZING PRACTICES TO PROMOTE THRIVING & CONNECTEDNESS

Given the profile of iGen students, they face a myriad of challenges when they enter college, and we have a short time to prepare them for success. Institutionalizing practices is generally considered the last step of a change process and requires alignment of organizational infrastructures that reinforce the desired practices and behaviors, management and information systems that support the change, and enablers that provide motivation and opportunity for individuals to make contributions to the desired outcomes.

While we currently have many wonderful programs and practices in place, we lack an *integrated system* to promote thriving and connectedness at Stetson. The silos and relational challenges that exist across programs, departments, schools, and faculty/staff levels of the institution will limit the effectiveness of efforts aimed at improving thriving and connectedness. To maximize our desired outcomes, we could benefit from the implementation of processes and structures that will enable our culture to evolve and will help foster a culture of connectedness and development, in which the thriving, connectedness, and development of students, faculty, and staff colleagues, are considered simultaneously.

To institutionalize practices, the starting point is to identify and remove/mitigate sources of complacency. To name a few, we suffer from lack of knowledge, lack of shared understanding, and lack of accountability. For example, relationships and development are at the core of the desired outcomes and while, we assess “accessibility” in course evaluations, we miss opportunities to formally assess a broader spectrum of relational skills. Similarly, only one item on our course evaluations comes close to being considered an indicator of developmental feedback, yet that is a key aspect of promoting thriving. There is robust support for the importance of psychological safety for learning processes, but training and assessment of behaviors that support this outcome are absent. This is just a sample of the barriers we face.

While not an exhaustive list, through conversation, I would like to propose ideas that may contribute to institutionalizing practices that promote thriving and connectedness at Stetson. I plan to organize the discussion into three main areas—organizational infrastructures, management systems, and student-facing initiatives.

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