

Leveraging Service Design for Higher Education Transformation



Sahibzada Mayed is a creative alchemist who uses design and storytelling to cultivate joy and imagination as tools of liberation. Mayed serves as the Co-Lead of Strategy and Research at Pause and Effect, a liberation-focussed imagination and design collective based on Coast Salish territories. mayed@sahibzadamayed.com

Christine Flanagan is a champion of educational innovation with over 20 years' expertise in design methodologies and student-focussed strategies. At Kinetic Seeds, she leads efforts to transform education through inclusive and equitable practices, empowering students and reshaping institutions. cflanagan@kineticseeds.com

How do we help today's college students make the most of their time, energy and money invested? This question is at the heart of ongoing discussions among educators, policymakers and stakeholders. Many solutions lie in new programmes, policies and structures, particularly to support minoritised populations. But are they really working?

Addressing the equity gap

For many years, the challenge to increase college attainment rates and decrease attainment gaps between racial and ethnic groups has led to significant investments targeting everything from college admissions to student support systems, to innovative teaching methods and culturally responsive curricula. Unfortunately, data suggests that while overall attainment rates have shown a modest upward trend – particularly in the category of the four-year degree – the gaps between racial groups have changed remarkably little.¹ What gives?

We attribute this lack of advancement to the fact that institutional efforts to boost student success have often excluded, neglected and silenced the very voices they aim to support. This is why recognising diversity alone is not enough. To effect meaningful change, we must address the root issues of inclusion and the power imbalances that drive the student experience and shape institutional culture.

As researchers and designers, we argue that there is a silent gap in student-centred change. Current approaches to institutional transformation do not encourage or facilitate collaboration between today's students and higher education decision-makers. These dynamics often side-line students from shaping their own experiences and futures. We have noticed how limited opportunities for students to instigate change lead to misaligned agendas for institutional transformation that fail to reflect the realities of students' lived experiences. This is where we believe service design has a profound role to play.

Navigating complexities of service design in higher education

Higher education is a service. At its best, it empowers individuals with knowledge, skills and critical thinking abilities; fosters personal, creative and professional growth; prepares students for the workforce and life-long learning; and contributes to the betterment of society through research, innovation and community engagement.

At its worst, it provides homogeneous experiences and resources that marginalise diverse perspectives, reinforce inequities and prioritise institutional prestige over student well-being and holistic development.

So, how do we create essential strategies and tools for integrating student perspectives into institutional transformation? How do we ensure their experiences shape a more inclusive education system?

We believe that applying a traditional service design approach is quite compelling in the context of higher education. However, it certainly comes with its own complexities and challenges. Firstly, the definition of a service here is blurry because of the difficulty in mapping out the dynamic interplay of relationships, stakeholders and functions.

Paulo Freire's 'banking concept of education'² expresses how learning can reproduce hierarchical relationships when student agency is not fully realised. We risk reinforcing a transactional model that exacerbates existing power differentials when we see students through a customer-centric perspective that can be limiting. Therefore, we feel that there is a greater need for fostering reciprocal relationships and creating space for students to be active decision-makers within the institutional ecosystem.

Secondly, the scope and scale of services in higher education is hard to determine. If we consider a higher-education institution to be an overarching service itself, it comprises multiple interconnected and nested services, each catering to different aspects of the academic and administrative spheres.

From the student perspective, these include academic advising, career counselling, student health services, library services, housing, dining and extracurricular activities, etc. The challenge lies in being able to holistically design for – and measure the impact of – these services. The interdependency between these services further adds to the complexity of effecting change within this ecosystem.

Lastly, we face a considerable challenge in measuring the impact and success of what constitutes a good service. Although not unique to higher education, conflicting priorities, lack of transparency and power relations between various stakeholders exacerbate this challenge.

Conventional metrics of impact measurement do not capture the full picture. For example, graduation or job placement rates routinely provide significant indicators of student success. However, these signals fail to account for whether students have benefited from their educational experiences. Often, many students end their journey with obtaining a degree at the expense of their mental health, financial security and overall well-being. This results in a compromised sense of achievement and a diminished return on their educational investment.

This reality highlights a need to examine and shift the ways in which impact is measured. Notably, we have found an overemphasis on quantification such as retention rates, enrolment numbers and institutional rankings.

Subsequently, the subjective nature of diverse, individual experiences, while difficult to measure, often become delegitimised or neglected. While developing a robust, mixed-methods approach can help address some of these issues, we risk reproducing the same underlying logics of coloniality in our changemaking efforts. Rather than seeing students through an objectified lens, we can reimagine what relational engagement looks like when intentionally nurtured with care, dignity and reciprocity.

Service design as a catalyst for relational change

Building on these complexities and challenges, it becomes clear that a traditional service design approach needs to evolve to address these issues effectively. For instance, imagine if the goal of service design was to foster increased agency, autonomy, belonging, and – dare we say – empowerment among the people it serves?

To navigate these challenges, we must lean into a relationship-driven research model. This approach goes beyond conventional structural changes and delves into the relational and transformative aspects of system change.

To set the stage for our approach, we draw on the 'Six Conditions of System Change' framework³, which offers a comprehensive approach to system change at three levels (see Figure 1).

Our current era of 'if it can't be measured, it can't be managed' overwhelmingly focuses on structural changes

due to their measurable and data-driven nature. Structural changes address policies, practices, and resource flows – visible elements of a system that designers work to alter directly.

In conjunction with structural change, there is often a simultaneous pursuit of changing mental models. This level targets deeply ingrained beliefs, assumptions and values that shape how individuals and groups perceive situations, adhere to societal rules and norms, participate in experiences, or accept new products or services.

While crucial, this type of change is challenging to achieve, as it requires deep reflection and a fundamental shift in mindset that influences behaviour and decision-making. Efforts to change mental models frequently fail to include diverse perspectives, leading to resistance or outright denial. Even when diverse perspectives are present, dominant groups often do not fully acknowledge or integrate them.

This raises the question: How can we ensure that learning and development happens across the stakeholder ecosystem?

For example, consider the current state of DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility) initiatives. Many focus on structural changes, such as diversity training programs or revised hiring practices and policies. However, these often fail to address underlying

beliefs and assumptions, resulting in limited long-term impact and, at times, outright resistance, or revolt. In essence, we have designed without fostering clear shifts in mindset.

We believe this situation arises from too little time having been spent addressing the semi-explicit relational level – the one that targets relationships, connections and power dynamics. Engaging at this level provides a foundation where both structural and mental model changes can take root. While this level isn't easily scaled – and arguably should not be – the true value here lies in fostering genuine connections, mutual understanding and trust between students and the people who serve them.

Achieving relational change requires shifting and sharing power with students

Over the years, higher education professionals across the United States have likened student voice and engagement to the sighting of a mythical creature: 'people have sworn they found it, but very few can corroborate that it's actually real', or, 'the sprinkles on an elaborate, fully-baked cake.' We have also heard it compared to 'the master of ceremony being afraid of the clowns', highlighting a deep-seated disconnect and fear of the very elements meant to bring learning and development. Ultimately, student engagement remains 'the dream we are always chasing but never quite catch'.

Six Conditions of Systems Change

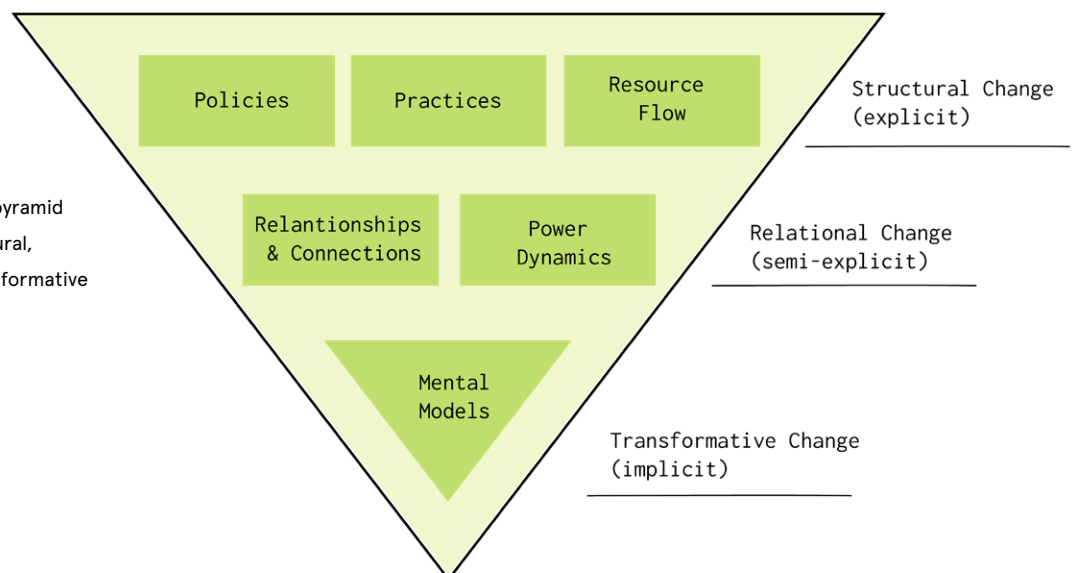
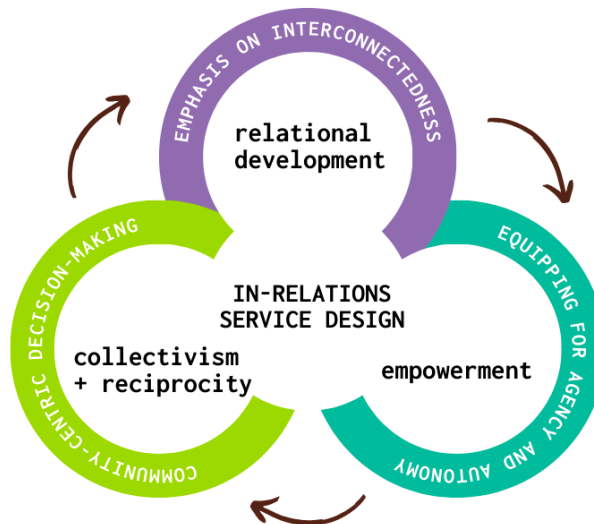


Fig. 1: An inverted pyramid showing the structural, relational and transformative levels of change

credit: Waters of Systems Change, FSG

Fig. 2: A Venn diagram showing the in-relations service design model



Metaphors aside, what if higher education professionals sought to shift power by intentionally collaborating and sharing power with students? What if, together, they sought to learn, interrogate, examine, design, decide and implement changes that advance equity and student success? Not as an ‘add-on’ to existing strategies but as a means to systems change?

Service design in service of shifting and sharing power

To disrupt normative power structures, we need to ensure that students from minoritised communities’ experiences are seen, heard and honoured, and that their perspectives are actively reflected in decision-making and policy. We propose an in-relations service design approach (see Figure 2) that fosters genuine, long-term student relationships and shared power within educational environments.

This model builds on three foundational themes: Relational development, collectivism and reciprocity, and empowerment.

- Drawing from Indigenous knowledge and practices, relational development underscores the importance of cultivating relationships as essential to enabling students’ abilities to thrive. For example, service designers frequently conduct interviews, focus groups and surveys, but these methods often

result in superficial engagement. True relational engagement requires ongoing, immersive interactions to build trust and understand students’ contexts, histories and experiences, while committing to transparency and accountability.

- Collectivism and reciprocity emphasise mutual exchange and co-operation, while prompting us to honour our relational responsibilities to each other. By fostering these practices, we build communities where every student feels heard, seen and valued. In service design, these concepts translate to creating platforms and opportunities for students to collaboratively express their perspectives, ideas, challenges and solutions. This means establishing a culture where feedback is not only welcomed, but actively sought and acted upon, empowering students to take ownership of their learning and contribute to continuous improvement. While service designers often claim to embrace these principles through workshops and brainstorming sessions, many of these practices are one-way, extracting information without providing tangible benefits in return. Effective collectivism involves valuing, learning from and with, recognising students as experts, and addressing power dynamics to ensure collaborative leadership and shared decision-making.

- Empowerment is the holy grail of relational development; when students feel empowered, they have the tools and opportunities to influence decisions that impact their lives. Through mutual support and collective action, we can build a nurturing environment where students are encouraged and equipped to drive their personal and collective success. While service designers often tout empowerment, they can fall short by focusing on surface-level solutions that do not address systemic barriers. True empowerment requires institutions to genuinely share power with students. It demands a commitment to ongoing support and creating environments where students are co-creators in their educational journey. This approach challenges traditional hierarchies, ensuring that student empowerment is foundational to service design.

Reflections and considerations

As designers, we understand the need to reflect on and discern our own positionality within the ecosystems we are embedded in. It would be wrong to say that, as practitioners, we have always done right by students we sought to serve and understand. At times, our methods have felt extractive and distancing, leaving students feeling tokenised at best and re-traumatised at worst.

In higher education, inquiry is often designed for knowledge extraction, particularly from minoritised communities. This approach contains inherent biases that necessitate a commitment to understanding and addressing the unique needs, expectations and lived experiences of students.

Based on our own experiences working directly with students, we learned the importance of how change-making efforts at each level feed into the other and are enmeshed together. This curiosity led us to wonder whether depicting the process for system change in higher education requires a different kind of metaphor – one that transcends the normative hierarchy between structurally explicit, relationally semi-explicit and transformative mental model changes.

What if instead we view it as a river of ever-flow tributaries that represent the continuous, interconnected and dynamic processes that drive meaningful change at multiple scales of transformation?

Within this context, the impact of effective student voice and engagement practices cannot be overstated. These practices provide authentic insights into student experiences, guiding institutions toward meaningful transformation. By building capacity and driving change, student voices become powerful tools for institutional improvement and advancement.

Conclusion

We hope our contributions continue to pave pathways for emergent service design practices, which purposefully seek to build connections and reciprocal relationships. Beyond the realm of higher education, we believe that intentionally investing resources for community engagement enriches our service ecosystems and inevitably leads to improved outcomes. Our work builds upon a rich and ever-expanding wealth of community-based knowledge and is an invitation to recalibrate our practices and methodologies to advance equity and empowerment.

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- 1 See Lumina Foundation. (2022). Data retrieval from <https://www.luminafoundation.org/stronger-nation/report/#/progress>
 - 2 Freire, P. (2018). The banking concept of education. In *Thinking about schools* (pp. 117-127). Routledge.
 - 3 FSG. (2018). *The Water of Systems Change*. FSG. Retrieved from https://www.fsg.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/The-Water-of-Systems-Change_rc.pdf