

From Margins to Center: Reimagining Well-being through Holistic Education

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the transformative power of holistic education in addressing the needs of students within higher education environments. By synthesizing critical pedagogy, intersectionality, and culturally responsive pedagogy, this body of work introduces the Holistic Enrichment and Inclusive Learning (HEIL) Approach. This framework, which prioritizes the holistic well-being of students, incorporates culturally responsive practices such as trauma-informed care and restorative justice. The integration of these diverse educational practices aims to transform higher education institutions into spaces that foster collective liberation and support students' thriving academically, socially, and emotionally.

Keywords: *holistic education, intersectionality, social transformation, student belonging, higher education, culturally responsive pedagogy*

Introduction

Many have asked what it means to bring your whole personhood into your external settings, such as work and education. What does it look like to show up authentically, both physically and mentally, within these spaces? Making it clear who you are, rather than letting the environment project its assumptions onto you. What does it mean to be viewed through a holistic lens? What does it look like for a space like higher education to honor you as a whole person and consider your social and emotional development? These questions rattled around in my brain as I began writing this piece.

At the center of my heart space, I wondered what holistic education meant to me, as an African

American woman from the East Coast, the only doctor in my family on both sides, whose educational path was not a linear one. I wondered what my educational experiences would have been like if I had viewed them through the lens of intersectionality. How would my institutions have cared for me differently if they had understood my needs as a multifaceted student, rather than viewing me as a number, a body, or a diversity check? Scouring my brain for these answers, I realized the question was not what it would look like to be centered within these settings, but instead, what would these environments, such as higher education, need to change about their institutions to suit the needs of and collectively care for its students from an intersectional and holistic lens. What would it look like to move

those who were once on the margins to the center of their environment? Centering the well-being of those often swept up in the undercurrent of higher education's diverse but frequently challenging waters. Ultimately, I concluded that holistic and culturally responsive education must take a leading role in driving change, even in a tumultuous political climate, as it seeks to undo many of the initiatives these communities have fought for.

This paper proposes the Holistic Enrichment and Inclusive Learning (HEIL) Framework as a transformative model that integrates culturally responsive pedagogy, trauma-informed care, and community collaboration to reimagine higher education through a holistic lens.

Holistically Me

In 2022, I wrote a piece about my experiences within my doctoral program as one of four Black women in a predominantly white cohort. I spoke about the resistance to my existence and how, along with three other Black women, I carved out a space for us to care for each other wholly as individuals. Within this piece, I delved into what I called our sanctuary space—a space for us, embedded in the center of what felt like a constant firestorm. One where we shared our deepest fears, moments of anxiety, triumphs, and even our astonishment at our institution's lack of care (Sylvester, 2022). This space was a segregated one where we could attend to our needs and articulate our frustrations. It was also a space where resistance was centered and plans for actions to move the needle forward within our program were sketched. I would call it a place of invisible labor, one that was always moving and taking on the burden of being the voice against a system that was not built with us in mind. It was then, in that moment of peace, that I wondered what care would look like if our institutions adopted a community-based approach when crafting their doctoral programs (Sylvester, 2022). What could

liberation look like if we, as marginalized students, were consulted, considered, and allowed the agency to co-design a space that called upon our presence as students but built no space for comfort? Looking back at that piece, I realize what I was seeking was a space that viewed me not just as a student, but as a whole and complete human being with a multifaceted personhood. What I was looking for was holistic education.

Introducing Holistic Education: In My Own Words

Within marginalized communities, holistic education plays a pivotal role in fostering overall well-being. Specifically, within educational settings, it operates as a transformative force that addresses the multifaceted dimensions of wellness for students of color. Delving into the nuanced understanding of well-being, this paper explores strategies for its support and the potential for further enrichment within higher education environments, drawing on a synthesis of critical pedagogy, intersectionality theory, and community-based approaches. Furthermore, this study examines the complex relationships between holistic education and well-being, particularly in marginalized contexts (Paris, 2017).

Within marginalized communities, the concept of 'well-being' extends beyond physical health to encompass emotional resilience, cultural pride, and social connectedness. Educators in these communities adopt holistic approaches that recognize and respect learners' diverse identities and experiences. This inclusivity of well-being recognizes the impacts of systemic oppression and empowers individuals to reclaim agency over their health and happiness (Freire, 1970; Smith, 2012; Solorzano et al., 2000).

By focusing implementation on culturally responsive practices, trauma-informed care, and restorative justice approaches, educational settings can further center well-being. Utilizing framing from Ladson-Billings' (1995) advocacy for

culturally relevant pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of centering students' cultural backgrounds and experiences, enables this work to demonstrate how we can foster a sense of belonging and self-efficacy. Furthermore, understanding that collaborative partnerships with community organizations and grassroots initiatives provide additional support layers, offering resources and networks that nurture holistic well-being beyond the classroom, is essential (hooks, 1994).

Despite these efforts, challenges persist in creating truly supportive higher education environments within marginalized communities. Structural barriers, including resource disparities, institutionalized discrimination, and cultural erasure, undermine holistic approaches to education and well-being (Tang, 2021). Fine, Weis, and Powell's (1997) exploration of power dynamics emphasizes the need for transformative change at systemic levels to dismantle oppressive structures and promote equitable access to holistic education, daring us to envision what dismantling could look like.

This paper advocates for a holistic approach to higher education that prioritizes well-being as a fundamental aspect of learning and growth by amplifying the voices of marginalized scholars, educators, and community members.

This work is situated within the broader field of holistic education, which advocates for nurturing the intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and social dimensions of students. Scholars such as Miller (2007), Noddings (2005), and Miller (2000) emphasize that holistic learning requires educational environments to honor the interconnectedness of human development and recognize each learner's full humanity. These foundations complement the HEIL framework's call for relational learning, ethical care, and

transformative engagement, particularly within marginalized communities.

Whose Work Is It Anyway?

While the work of collective care is everyone's responsibility within higher education, it is essential to note that the environment currently experienced by marginalized individuals is not solely at the hands of those within their various communities (Freire, 1972; Ladson-Billings, 2006). Therefore, this paper advocates for ownership of transformation to be a partnership between institutions and the individuals who require holistic care within their environment (hooks, 2003). Additionally, it calls for institutions to do the heavy lifting to shift from an exclusionary environment to one that encompasses compassion, collaboration, and community while working in tandem with these communities (Tinto, 1993). By centering marginalized students as contextual experts, these institutions will engage in a participatory design process grounded in shifting power dynamics and privilege from the dominant narrative by incorporating the multilayered and intersectional one within it (Collins, 2000; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

Ground Ourselves and Our Framing

To center this work, it was essential to align frameworks that focused on culturally responsive practices, trauma-informed care, and restorative practices, which could address how higher education can enhance the environment for marginalized communities (Carter & Borrett, 2021; Herman & Whitaker, 2020). For this piece, I have chosen to ground it in the following frameworks:

- Crenshaw's Intersectionality Theory (Crenshaw, 1991);
- Ladson-Billings' Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995); and
- Freire's Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970).

Intersectionality Theory

Focusing on the various aspects of identity, specifically race, gender, class, and sexuality, Intersectionality Theory highlights how these elements intersect to create unique realities (Crenshaw, 1991; Collins, 2000). Specifically, Crenshaw examines the proximity that individuals with overlapping identities have to discrimination and privilege. The theory highlights that these intersections contribute to the distinct, compounded experiences of oppression and privilege. Within holistic education, it can be applied to ensure that educational policies and practices recognize these distinctions while addressing the diverse challenges students with multiple identity markers face and honoring the complexity of those students' experiences, ultimately fostering a learning environment invested in the wholeness of their students creating space where they feel seen, heard, valued, and understood (Banks, 2009; Nieto, 2010; Sleeter & Grant, 2009).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy

Developed by Ladson-Billings, Culturally Responsive Pedagogy emphasizes the importance of utilizing students' cultural backgrounds and experiences as a foundation for the learning environment (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Similar to the Intersectionality Theory, it seeks to push these narratives to the forefront by applying an approach that aims to improve student engagement and, ultimately, achievement by making the curriculum accessible and recognizable to their experiences (Gay, 2018). In addition, it seeks to challenge the societal, structural, and institutional biases that envelop students' experiences. It hopes to design spaces that develop students' cultural competency and critical consciousness through critical thinking (Banks, 2009). Within holistic education, it could be applied to transform the curriculum into something that mirrors multiple experiences and

reflects the diversity of cultures within the student body (Paris & Alim, 2017). To achieve this, the approach must extend beyond mere acknowledgment and incorporate practical, responsive teachings into the learning process (Hammond, 2015).

Critical Pedagogy

Developed by Freire, Critical Pedagogy urges students to question and challenge the world around them, specifically the power structures and status quo (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994). As an educationally based philosophy, it asserts that education inspires both critical thinking and activism; therefore, for environments to change, students and teachers must collaborate on learning (Giroux, 2011). Freire's philosophy embodies the ideal that education is a practice of freedom. Thus, students are not just there to learn from the environment around them but also to be active in crafting their own learning journey. Applying this philosophy to holistic education means creating a dynamic where students are encouraged to voice their thoughts about the curriculum, class setting, policies and procedures, and the structures surrounding them (Kincheloe, 2008). It encourages students to actively reflect, fostering agency, challenging norms, and becoming change-makers. Within higher education, this approach explicitly seeks to create a relationship between students and their institution that encourages them to stand together and cultivate an environment where everyone is seen, heard, and valued (Darder, 2018; McLaren, 2016).

Together, these three frameworks—intersectionality, culturally responsive pedagogy, and critical pedagogy—form the foundation of the HEIL Framework, offering a layered and relational approach to transforming higher education from the inside out.

Weaving Together to Reimagine Holistic Education

To embark on a journey where these concepts are woven together means seeking to transform education frameworks. The literature highlights the narrative that students, particularly those who have been historically marginalized, are not being valued within higher education. To imagine a world where holistic education is at the forefront of education means that environments must look beyond academics and ensure that social justice, critical thinking, and collective care are centered on contributing to the diversity within their space. To reimagine a system like this, students cannot be viewed as passive recipients of knowledge, but instead as active participants in an equitable learning environment. Therefore, power must be ceded to give agency to students to challenge injustices and lead to genuine social transformation and collective educational liberation.

Carving Out Something New

Utilizing the three frameworks supported the creation of the Holistic Enrichment and Inclusive Learning Framework (HEIL), which carries this work forward (Crenshaw, 1991; Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995). Grounded in synthesizing the above frameworks, it aims to transform higher education environments to center inclusive practices that uplift marginalized students. It calls for the recognition of the overlapping identities of students, seeking to integrate cultural references into the curriculum, fostering critical thinking and awareness of social justice issues, and enriching its space by creating policies that honor all learners, especially those once marginalized (Banks, 2009; Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015).

The core principles of this framework are to incorporate the following:

1. **Intersectional Insight and Integration:** Recognizing and addressing students' multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, class,

disability, and sexuality) to understand their unique experiences and challenges (Crenshaw, 1991). Tailoring educational practices to reflect and honor diversity promotes a sense of belonging and integrates an understanding of students' identities into all aspects of education, thereby fostering inclusivity and equity (Collins, 2000; Nieto, 2010; Sleeter & Grant, 2009).

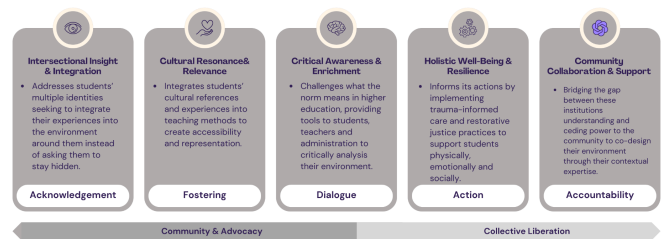
2. **Cultural Resonance and Relevance:** Integrating students' cultural references and lived experiences into the curriculum and teaching methods to make education as relevant and accessible as possible (Ladson-Billings, 1995). It fosters a learning environment that values and celebrates students' diverse backgrounds and recognizes that this diversity is key to their success (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017).
3. **Critical Awareness and Enrichment:** Equipping students with the knowledge and skills to challenge systematic inequities and transform oppressive systems and structures within higher education through critical analysis and dialogue about social justice issues (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2011).
4. **Holistic Well-being and Resilience:** Implementing trauma-informed care and restorative justice practices that address the physical, emotional, and social aspects of students' well-being by building off of educational practices through the lens of community-centered pedagogy (Carter & Borrett, 2021; Herman & Whitaker, 2020).
5. **Community Collaboration and Support:** Fostering collaborative partnerships with community organizations that center their contextual expertise to support a sense of

community within the educational setting. This aims to establish and maintain a focus on community as essential for students, thereby enhancing student support systems and resources (Zúñiga et al., 2007; Taylor et al., 2017).

Utilizing the above core principles of this theory enables it to address actual change that drives institutional change through policy development. Within the HEIL framework, it recognizes that institutionalizing these principles can create an environment necessary to address the diverse needs of students and develop policies that ensure the implementation, sustainability, and enhancement of practices such as culturally responsive teaching, trauma-informed care, and restorative justice over time. Recent studies underscore the impact of culturally sustaining and trauma-informed practices on student well-being and academic engagement. A 2021 study by Felten & Lambert highlights the transformative power of relationship-rich environments in higher education, showing measurable increases in retention and belonging among BIPOC students. Additionally, Paris & Alim (2017) and Hammond (2015) provide empirical frameworks demonstrating how culturally sustaining pedagogies improve learning outcomes by affirming students' cultural identities and histories.

To effectively generate policies, a foundation must be established that supports systemic change, fostering environments where students can thrive academically, socially, physically, and emotionally (Banks, 2009; Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015).

The Holistic Enrichment & Inclusive Learning Framework (HEIL)



Note: DeLisha Tapscott, Ed.D. HEIL framework builds off of Kimberle Crenshaw's Intersectional Theory (1991), Gloria Ladson-Billings' Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), and Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 1970).

Figure 1. The Holistic Enrichment and Inclusive Learning Framework

Holistic Education in Practice

To truly embody the principles of the Holistic Education and Inclusive Learning (HEIL) Framework, institutions must be ready to go beyond the traditional path into one that seeks to reduce harm, center student voices, and critically assess its structures and impact (Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Crenshaw, 1991).

Several institutions have already begun to operationalize holistic education practices that align with the HEIL Framework. For instance, Prescott College integrates student-led curriculum design and community-based fieldwork, emphasizing ecological and social justice (Prescott College, 2024). Antioch University employs learner-centered strategies grounded in community wellness and social equity, prioritizing nontraditional learners and inclusive pedagogies (Antioch University, 2023). Meanwhile, Portland State University has partnered with student-led cultural centers to co-create trauma-informed spaces for peer mentorship and healing, aligning with community collaboration and restorative practices (Portland State University, 2022). These examples demonstrate how HEIL's principles—particularly community collaboration

and critical awareness—can be embedded in institutional policies and classroom experiences.

Policy Development and Actionable Change

Transformative higher education must focus not only on honoring and acknowledging students but also on enacting change by institutionalizing the above principles through the establishment of intersectional insight, cultural resonance, critical awareness, and well-being, while emphasizing community collaboration. Initiating clearly defined policies rooted in inclusivity supports a foundation for systemic change where these policies can thrive, be sustained, and ultimately enhanced over time. This commitment to policy development paves the way for the integration of the core principles of HEIL to be put into practice by focusing on policies such as:

- **Curriculum Policies:** Developing policies that mandate the inclusion of diverse cultural perspectives through the use of intersectional content in the curriculum will ensure that curricula reflect the lived experiences and identities of various students and support representation in education (Crenshaw, 1991; Ladson-Billings, 1995).
- **Resource Allocation:** Developing policies that address resource disparities among students within educational institutions ensures equitable access to facilities, materials, opportunities for students, and social and emotional support for students. Implementing funding models that prioritize programs serving marginalized communities by connecting with these communities to represent their needs fosters a more equitable distribution of resources. In addition, crafting community partnership policies that facilitate partnerships between community organizations and education institutions

that focus on ceding power and placing these organizations in the driver's seat allows for the creation of frameworks that provide students with additional resources and support focused on enhancing their well-being (Banks, 2009; Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015).

- **Trauma-informed and Restorative Practices:** Developing these practices aims to foster a sense of community while acknowledging that harm has occurred and must be addressed to rebuild trust. Focusing on creating alignment by ceding students' power so they may use their agency to build space where their shared experiences can be heard and issues can be addressed is critical to long-term resilience, community cohesion, and transformative practices. These steps are crucial in creating an environment where students can thrive and feel safe and supported in their overall well-being (Carter & Borrett, 2021; Herman & Whitaker, 2020).

Ceding institutional power in meaningful ways involves embedding student voice in structural processes. For example, participatory budgeting models used at some City University of New York (CUNY) campuses allow students to decide how funding for wellness or equity initiatives is spent (Doctoral and Graduate Students' Council, n.d.). Curriculum co-design initiatives, such as Stanford's Equity practice in design principles, engage students in shaping course content based on lived experience (Stanford University, n.d.). Establishing standing student advisory councils with decision-making power—not just consultative input—helps reconfigure the traditional hierarchies that often silence marginalized perspectives.

Each of the above policies further strengthens higher education institutions and aligns with the

goals the HEIL framework aims to advance (Zúñiga et al., 2007; Taylor et al., 2017).

Goals for the HEIL Framework

One of the primary goals of this framework is to ensure that students feel valued and understood by their institutions. It is understood that when students see themselves reflected in the representation of their identities and lived experiences, they, in turn, feel supported, and their sense of belonging increases, causing them to be more vulnerable and lean into their authenticity. In addition, it can lead to higher engagement, which supports their growth and development in confidently pursuing their goals. The HEIL framework is grounded in the idea that education should always catalyze social change, empowering students to exercise their agency and autonomy, thereby challenging and transforming oppressive structures within their institutions and the broader society. This framework aims to equip students with the tools necessary to advocate for themselves and their communities by fostering critical awareness and promoting active engagement with social justice issues. This approach transforms education into a space that embarks on a journey to create the next generation of agents of change, who can craft meaningful contributions and help create a more just and equitable society (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2011).

Lastly, this framework embeds holistic education to promote collective well-being and liberation by centering ongoing dialogue, collaboration, and advocacy. Emphasizing the importance of community and mutual kinship, it aims to create environments where members from diverse backgrounds can thrive. It centers on the belief that working together can address systemic inequalities and promote waves of inclusion necessary to eradicate injustice and achieve institutionalized liberation. This kind of liberation ensures that the benefits of holistic education extend beyond the

proverbial four walls of a classroom or corners of an institution and instead stretch deep into the bodies and minds of its students, fostering a sense of shared responsibility and collective action that carries throughout the ages (Gay, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017; Hammond, 2015).

Challenges and Barriers

Attempting to transform higher education institutions into spaces that implement holistic and inclusive education comes with its structural barriers, including a few components such as resource disparity, institutionalized discrimination, and cultural erasure. These barriers create unequal educational outcomes for students from marginalized communities (Tang, 2021). Overcoming these barriers means that there is a level of advocacy to increase funding and re-evaluation of resource allocation policies to ensure they meet the needs of all students, combatting discrimination through anti-discrimination training and policy enforcement alongside the fostering of an inclusive culture, and lastly, genuine engagement with marginalized communities to ensure that their histories and perspectives are authentically represented not only in the curriculum but also in those teaching it (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2011).

A common challenge in implementing holistic education is institutional resistance, stemming from bureaucratic inertia, concerns about academic freedom, or discomfort with shifting power structures. Faculty may fear losing autonomy, and administrators may question how to measure intangible outcomes, such as belonging or well-being (Felten & Lambert, 2020). Addressing these concerns requires building cross-functional coalitions and piloting small-scale initiatives that demonstrate success. Engaging students as co-researchers or partners in program design—similar to participatory action research

models—can increase buy-in while centering marginalized voices.

Additionally, resistance to change and bureaucratic policies can also serve as barriers to implementing this framework in practice. Resistance to change can stem from faculty, administration, and other stakeholders, such as funders, who may lack an understanding of the need for change. The fear of losing power and discomfort with new approaches must be overcome by involving the efforts of these stakeholders in education and dialogue to ensure the tangible benefits of the HEIL framework are realized in practice. Effective strategies include leveraging student and community advocacy while creating clear, actionable plans with the impacted communities driving it forward (Banks, 2009; Gay, 2018; Hammond, 2015). For example, a national survey conducted by the American Council on Education (ACE) found that institutions that invested in culturally responsive student services saw a 14% increase in retention among students of color over a three-year period (ACE, 2022). Similarly, the Hope Center's 2021 report on basic needs insecurity showed that students at colleges with community-embedded wellness initiatives reported significantly higher levels of belonging and academic confidence (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2021).

Advocacy and Action

The HEIL Framework encourages institutions to incorporate marginalized voices, providing them with space to share their narratives in a way that feels authentic and transformative for them. While it can be challenging, it includes ensuring that marginalized scholars, educators, community leaders, and students have genuine influence and are not just involved in symbolic representation. It also means keeping up engagement and mitigating disinterest through investing in long-term relationship-building, providing continuous support for community and student-led initiatives,

and regular assessment and space for adaptation as issues arise for this framework to remain relevant and practical (Carter & Borrett, 2021; Herman & Whitaker, 2020; Zúñiga et al., 2007; Taylor et al., 2017).

Conclusion

To be embedded in their commitment to the continuous improvement of institutions that choose to implement the HEIL framework, these spaces must view this as an ongoing process that requires regular assessment, feedback, and analysis to make lasting improvements to policies and practices (Banks, 2009; Gay, 2018). With the ultimate goal of creating an environment where students are supported as whole persons, the vision calls for a collective commitment and collaboration to transform these spaces, making holistic education a reality for all students (Freire, 1970; Hammond, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 1995).

As a Black woman who recently graduated from a predominantly white doctoral program, I feel a profound sense of urgency to advocate for an approach that considers the full humanity of each student and honors their unique journey (Collins, 2000). Prioritizing well-being can no longer be an afterthought or reserved only for some; instead, these educational spaces must seek out these identities and collectively care for them in ways that respect and celebrate their journeys (Crenshaw, 1991). Holistic education must be at the forefront of educational reform, shifting the tide of marginalization and carving out opportunities to thrive regardless of race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability, with the call to action being one that not only seeks to further student development by making space for students' agency and autonomy but also ceding power so that it can last (hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2011). By doing this, we give the next generation of students a fighting chance to ask and solve society's challenges, creating a powerful tool for personal and collective

liberation (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994; Giroux, 2011).

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Author Bio

DeLisha Tapscott is a writer, researcher, and cultural strategist whose work sits at the intersections of race, gender, and digital life. She is the Co-Founder and Curator of Black Girl Narrative, a platform centering Black women's stories through research, digital campaigns, and advocacy. Her scholarship introduces Fractured Visibility Theory, exploring how Black women are hyper-visible yet unseen across systems. DeLisha's work bridges cultural critique and storytelling, from public writing to academic publications. With a doctorate in Organizational Leadership and a deep commitment to building spaces of care, her work challenges extractive systems and reimagines power through Black feminist thought. Rooted in D.C. and Prince George's County, DeLisha moves between research and community, always guided by the stories we inherit and the futures we shape.