

# FROM COLLEGE-READY STUDENTS TO STUDENT-READY HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

## Conversation Module 4

*Presented by Christina Yao at the meeting of the  
Roundtable on Systemic Change in Undergraduate STEM Education  
held at the Keck Center in Washington, DC on October 24, 2024*

### WHO IS THIS MODULE FOR?

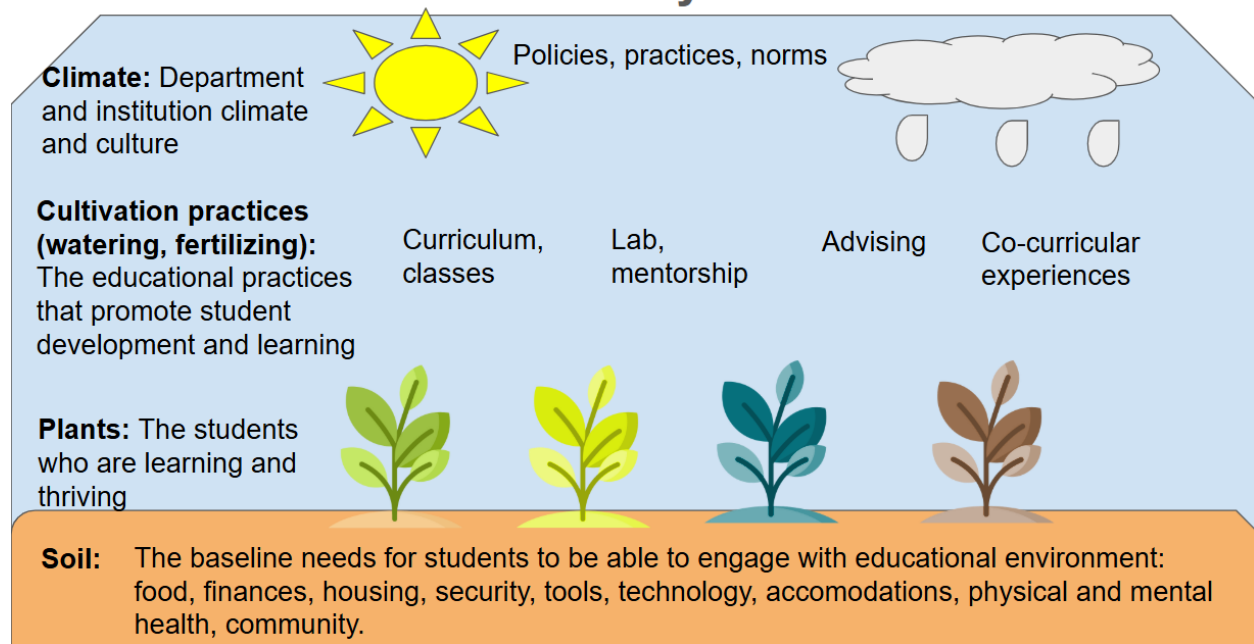
This module addresses all leaders at a higher education institution who have responsibility for student learning, including those in both formal and informal leadership roles. The module speaks particularly to leaders in academic and non-academic units, such as Department Chairs and Directors, whose roles empower them to enact systemic change within their units. Deans and Provosts, who have overall responsibility for the student experience, are also part of the intended audience.

### WHAT ARE THE KEY IDEAS IN THIS MODULE?

Often higher education institutions expect students to be *college-ready*. However, leaders and researchers are calling for a change towards *student-ready institutions*. McNair and colleagues call for “a paradigm shift, from focusing more on what students lack to focusing on what we can do, as educators, to create stronger, higher-quality educational environments” in colleges and universities (McNair et al., 2022, p. xiv). They encourage institutions to intentionally design systems, policies, and learning experiences that meet and welcome students where they are--rather than looking for students who already fit the institution’s past ideas of what “college-ready students” have learned and are able to do. In the last several decades, higher education stakeholders have lamented the state of incoming students’ college-readiness– that is, “the level of preparation a student needs in order to enroll and succeed, without remediation” (Conley, 2008, p. 4). Yet the idea of college-readiness puts all the responsibility on the student to transition to and through a new and unfamiliar environment. Instead, *student-ready institutions* build on the unique assets that individual students bring that can help them succeed (McNair et al., 2016 & 2022; Yao, et al., 2023). Of note, however, a student-ready institution would still encourage prospective students to be as prepared as possible for the college learning experience. Furthermore, being student-ready does not mean reducing or making the learning goals of the institution less robust. Rather, a student-ready institution articulates clear learning goals and supports all students to meet those goals.

The diagram below metaphorically envisions a student-ready institution as a sunny garden in which students thrive because they are situated in a supportive institutional environment. While the metaphor has limitations, it aids in explaining the meaning of a student-ready institution. The environment includes fertile ground that supports and recognizes the many dimensions of students’ lives and an overall context in which policies and practices are designed to recognize learners’ needs while building on their strengths. This module provides ideas that can help higher education institutions move toward being more *student-ready*.

# What does a student-ready institution look like?



McNair et al. (2022, pp. 22-25) present seven characteristics of “student-ready institutions”:

1. Know who their students are, how they are doing, and what they need to succeed.
2. Are intentional.
3. Foster a culture of inclusive leadership and shared ownership.
4. Are self-aware and opportunistic.
5. Understand the big picture and think long-term.
6. Focus on behavior.
7. Observe, act, innovate, and prioritize accountability

## HOW CAN A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION BETTER UNDERSTAND ITS STUDENTS?

Supporting students in a holistic way that enlists the full range of institutional policies and practices involves understanding their diverse and changing needs. Such understanding relates to who the institution’s students are and what they bring with them as assets, how students are experiencing the institutional context, and what they need from the institution to succeed. This kind of approach is often referred to as taking account of “the whole student.” The types of actions or changes an institution may want to consider to be more student-ready depend on the experiences, perspectives, and assets of their specific students. Examples of questions that departmental faculty and staff might discuss to consider the unique backgrounds and needs of their students might include the following:

- **What are the assets, life experiences, and perspectives students bring to the classroom setting?** Conversations might consider students’ home languages and ways of knowing, cultural backgrounds and norms, and home and work experiences. At the same time, assumptions based on any stereotypes should be carefully avoided.
- **What are the holistic needs of students beyond the classroom, including external responsibilities and pressures?** Discussions might consider the usefulness of targeted tutoring sessions, students’ housing and food needs, ways students could benefit from learning experiences involving community

engagement, strategies to build on peer relationships to enhance learning success, financial constraints affecting students' progress, safety and transportation issues, and how cultural and community expectations facing students may impact their learning success.

- **In what ways do students currently thrive and in what ways do they encounter challenges?** Educators could discuss observations and data on factors related to student learning in courses as well as conditions and factors related to challenges or lack of success. The use of data analytics to examine patterns and variables related to success or challenge has become frequent at many institutions.

Through conversations around such questions, institutional units may develop a deeper understanding of the assets their students bring with them to their higher education experience, as well as the challenges they encounter. Such consideration has the potential to help institutional leaders and faculty develop ideas for institutional policies and practices, as well as for course experiences and assignments, that more fully build on students' backgrounds, interests, and needs and, thus, support and encourage their success. [See the Supplemental Resources for more details].

## HOW CAN THE INSTITUTION BECOME MORE STUDENT-READY?

Understanding more fully the characteristics and experiences of the institution's students can provide a foundation for efforts to create a more student-ready university or college. Yet identifying and implementing the actions, policies, and practices that will help advance an institutional shift toward greater student-readiness can be challenging. Specific plans must be appropriate for particular institutional contexts, taking into account mission, scope, population, size, location, and funding model.

Institutions can consider many options for becoming more student-ready. For example, consideration might be given to rethinking usual models of instruction (e.g., schedules, times offered, experiences, context), developing teaching approaches that connect students with local geography (sometimes called place-based pedagogies), or increasing opportunities for experiential learning, which is a particularly effective learning strategy for many students. Faculty might also connect class content and assignments more closely to students' experiences and backgrounds.

While optimal approaches will vary by institution, we know that, in recent years, many institutions have learned that a significant portion of their student body needs to work while enrolled in school. So, by way of an example, we highlight how an institution responding to this circumstance among its students could become more student-ready. The institution might decide to consider structural or policy changes with positive implications for working students. For instance, leaders and faculty might consider offering a greater range of learning modalities (e.g., in-person, online, asynchronous, hybrid), reducing the number of days students need to be on campus, or expanding course scheduling options and office hours for key support units to accommodate students' child-care or elder-care responsibilities.

Institutions can consider a wide array of strategies to create a more student-ready context. Pedagogical discussions might explore incorporating more strategies that connect the students' academic and personal lives, blending courses around common themes, incorporating more experiential learning or internships, and encouraging faculty to adopt a greater range of evidence-based pedagogical approaches known to support effective learning for a wide range of learners. Institutional leaders might also consider creating an audit of policies, programs, and practices already supportive of the institution's commitment to being student-ready, and using the results as a platform on which to build further conversation and planning.

## WHAT QUESTIONS CAN FOCUS CONVERSATIONS ABOUT BEING STUDENT-READY?

With these examples in mind, institutional leaders—provosts, deans, and department chairs—may want to encourage questions among their colleagues and planning groups about ways to more fully support the learning success of the full range of students at the institution. Possible discussion questions include the following:

- In our institutional context, what does it mean for our institution to be “student-ready”?
- What would it mean at our institution to focus more on students’ assets, rather than their deficits, weaknesses, or shortcomings?
- How would we know if we are “student-ready”?
- To what extent and in what ways are we currently “student-ready”?
- Do we have institutional metrics or national data that help us know the extent to which the institution is “student-ready”?
- What concrete steps could we take to become more student-centered or student-ready? That is, how might we build on and make more visible the diverse assets the students bring to the classroom setting? How might we better align our instruction, curriculum, pedagogies, and practices in ways that build on the assets students bring to the educational setting?
- What existing programs, policies, and activities at the institution provide examples or foundations on which to build?
- What resources would be needed? How could we re-imagine how we use our resources in support of student learning? What timeline would be reasonable or possible?
- With what stakeholders or partners would we need or want to engage to develop more student-ready practices?
- How are we creating a sense of buy-in among our administrative leaders, faculty, and staff to advance our institution toward being more “student-ready”?

These discussion questions can be applied with institution-wide or department-specific groups. We note, however, that, as discussed in Module 3, the cultures in STEM fields create dynamics that impact students pursuing STEM courses and degrees. Thus, leaders, faculty, and staff in STEM units might want to focus specifically on their particular students and the meaning of being student-ready, especially in the STEM context.

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## REFERENCES CITED IN THIS MODULE

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